



# Grief *Conversations*

For all those living with loss  
& supporting others  
through loss

Gail Millar and Jill Phipps

# IMPORTANT COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

Downloadable media purchased from BRF, including (but not limited to) PDF document downloads and mp3 music, is protected by UK and international copyright laws.

## **You are allowed to:**

- print a single copy, provided it is for your own personal use.
- print without limit any pages labelled ‘Reproduced with permission from...’
- burn mp3 audio files to a single CD for use in venues where mp3s cannot be played.
- keep a single backup copy, provided only one copy is in use at any one time.

## **You are not allowed to:**

- print multiple copies of the PDF download file.
- print multiple copies of any musical scores within the PDF download file, unless the organisation printing them has appropriate licences. See [ccli.co.uk](http://ccli.co.uk) for more information.
- email, copy, post on a website or by any other means electronically share downloadable media.

**Note: If you have received this file by email, it may be an illegal copy. Please check with the sender that it has been legally obtained, and for conditions of its use.**

If you have any questions about the legal use of downloadable media, please contact us at [copyright@brf.org.uk](mailto:copyright@brf.org.uk).

# Grief Conversations

For all those living with loss  
& supporting others through loss

GAIL MILLAR and JILL PHIPPS





15 The Chambers, Vineyard  
Abingdon OX14 3FE  
[brf.org.uk](http://brf.org.uk)

Bible Reading Fellowship is a charity (233280)  
and company limited by guarantee (301324),  
registered in England and Wales

First published 2022  
All rights reserved

Text © Gail Millar and Jill Phipps  
This edition © Bible Reading Fellowship 2022  
Cover photo © iStock.com/Herzstaub

The authors assert the moral right to be identified as the authors of this work

### **Acknowledgements**

Unless otherwise acknowledged, scripture quotations are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version (Anglicised edition) copyright © 1979, 1984, 2011 by Biblica. Used by permission of Hodder & Stoughton Publishers, a Hachette UK company. All rights reserved. 'NIV' is a registered trademark of Biblica. UK trademark number 1448790.

Scripture quotations marked TLB are taken from The Living Bible copyright © 1971 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NRSV are taken from The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Anglicised edition, copyright © 1989, 1995 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked MSG are taken from *The Message*, copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002 by Eugene H. Peterson. Used by permission of NavPress. All rights reserved. Represented by Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Scripture quotations marked NLT are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007, 2013. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Every effort has been made to trace and contact copyright owners for material used in this resource. We apologise for any inadvertent omissions or errors, and would ask those concerned to contact us so that full acknowledgement can be made in the future.

Printed and bound by TJ Books

# Contents

Why this booklet? .....	5
Activities to consider on your grief journey.....	6
The hairdresser .....	9
The bride-to-be .....	12
The firefighter.....	15
The care home nurse .....	18
Community lament.....	21
The husband.....	24
The teacher.....	27
The ministry of presence .....	29
The supporter.....	32
The police officer.....	35
Furlough – the blessing and the cost .....	38
The vicar .....	41
New ways for new days .....	44
The junior doctor .....	47
The wife .....	50
Arranging the funeral .....	53
The occupational therapist .....	56
The daughter.....	59
The bridge.....	62
The doctors.....	64
The mum .....	67
The outsider .....	70
Peace and acceptance .....	73
Guidelines for listeners .....	76
Dos and don'ts with people who are grieving.....	78
Resources .....	80

**Gail Millar** is an Anna Chaplain, a grief counsellor and founder of the Christian charity, Befriended, whose vision is to end loneliness and isolation among older people living in mid-Sussex. She has worked in the Christian charity sector in various senior pioneering and development roles, including as an older people's specialist for The Salvation Army, and has a diploma in grief and bereavement counselling. Gail lives in Hurstpierpoint and is married to Stuart. They have five children and nine grandchildren and are active leaders in The Point Church.

**Jill Phipps** was an NHS physiotherapist working with older people for 20 years before becoming an older person's chaplain in Portsmouth for three years. During this time she joined the Anna Chaplaincy network and helped to pilot Messy Vintage when it was introduced into the UK from Jersey. Jill lives in Hampshire with her husband and dog; she has three grown-up sons and three grandchildren and is a lay minister in her village church.

## Anna Chaplaincy: Offering spiritual care in later life

BRF's Anna Chaplaincy ministry is an ecumenical, community-based, chaplaincy network promoting the spiritual welfare of older people, for people of strong, little or no faith at all. Anna Chaplains support older people and their carers wherever they may be – in residential care, in congregations, in their own homes and in the community. BRF's rapidly expanding Anna Chaplaincy network inspires, connects and equips churches, individuals and other groups involved in this ministry nationwide. Our work includes developing the Anna Chaplaincy model of best practice, offering training, resources and meet-ups, and advocating at a national level.



Find out more at [annachaplaincy.org.uk](http://annachaplaincy.org.uk)

# Why this booklet?

This booklet records true stories of people's personal experiences during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, whether a keyworker, an individual, a minister or other supporting role. For privacy and respect to the individuals, names and locations have been changed. Many people have suffered loss, whether that be bereavement, redundancy, financial or the loss of a relationship, and the aim of this booklet is to offer help and support.

Grief is a unique experience to each individual in response to any kind of loss.

The pandemic will always be a pivotal moment in history and will be a constant reminder to those who grieve.

## **This booklet is written:**

- in recognition of all those who have experienced loss, heartbreak and isolation in circumstances completely out of their control;
- in thanks to all those working in public services who have gone above and beyond the call of duty to care for and protect us, and who continue to do so;
- in support of all those who now live with grief, an empty chair at the table, an ache in their heart and a sorrow that will not go away.

# Activities to consider on your grief journey

## Priorities

### In the first week:

- Let your family and close friends know what has happened
- Allow other members of the family to pass the news on
- Call your pastor, minister or local church leader for support
- Call your employer to arrange leave of absence
- Call your financial advisor or a family friend who may be able to help with immediate financial issues, including:
  - Your loved one's will and notifying the executors
  - Registering the death and getting a death certificate
  - Life insurance and/or any other benefits
  - Bank accounts
  - Utility bills
  - Mortgage or landlord
- Let your doctor and any care agencies know of your bereavement
- Contact a funeral director and allow them to help you with all the practical issues of the funeral
- Include close family and friends in the funeral arrangements
- Allow others to answer your calls/messages

## Personal

- Drink plenty of fluids
- Eat little and often
- Get fresh air – even if this is opening the window
- Rest and try to sleep when you can
- Maintain a daily routine – wash, dress, eat, pray, exercise
- Enjoy a soak in the bath with bubbles
- You may be forgetful, so:
  - Write down things that are going round in your head

- Write down all the things you would appreciate help with, such as making a meal, doing some shopping, writing thank-you cards, gardening, transport, home maintenance
- You may feel sad, confused, irritable or angry. Do not feel guilty for any of the feelings you are experiencing
- Visit/ring your GP and let them know how you are feeling, sleeping, eating
- Accept help! Say thank you and show people the list of things they can help with
- When you are ready, ask the family to help you clear out your loved one's clothes and possessions. This will take a lot longer than you imagine, so do it in stages
- Be the kindest person you can be to yourself
- Forgive yourself and others

## Physical

If you have been active, you may find it helpful to resume some form of physical activity:

- Walking and talking are great for your well-being and connecting with others who may have similar experiences to you.
  - Healthwalks: [walkingforhealth.org.uk](http://walkingforhealth.org.uk)
  - The Ramblers: [ramblers.org.uk](http://ramblers.org.uk)
- Exercise or relaxation classes
- Tennis, squash, badminton and football are all sports that may help release tension, anger and pain (warn your opponent that they may be in for a tough match)
- Breathing exercises designed to relieve stress, anxiety and panic as part of your daily routine ([nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/guides-tools-and-activities/breathing-exercises-for-stress](http://nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/guides-tools-and-activities/breathing-exercises-for-stress))
- Mindfulness exercises
- Make bread – kneading dough can be very therapeutic

## Practical

- Collect photos and make a memory book
- Plant a tree in memory of your loved one
- Keep a journal

## 8 GRIEF CONVERSATIONS

- Make a 'Tear Bottle'. Cut out lots of tear-shaped bits of coloured paper. Write on a tear-shape your feelings and thoughts – happy or sad, now and in the past – and put them in the bottle
- Create a 'Hope Board'; write at the top "things I am looking forward to". Gradually add to this board pictures, events, diary dates to brighten up your future. Life will get better!

## Processing

- Create a strong support network of friends around you – remember the family are grieving too
- Counselling services
- Chaplaincy
- Cruse Bereavement – [cruse.org.uk](http://cruse.org.uk)
- Grief support group online or in person
- Mind counselling
- Grief café – [thegoodgrieftrust.org](http://thegoodgrieftrust.org)
- Music – listen to music that you can immerse yourself in
- Listen to radio programmes, podcasts, YouTube, articles of others' stories of loss and grief
- Read – when able to concentrate, books of your choice that you find helpful, uplifting and encouraging

## Purposeful

- Light a candle at home or in a church or on the Church of England website [churchofengland.org/life-events/funerals/light-candle-remember-someone](http://churchofengland.org/life-events/funerals/light-candle-remember-someone)
- Wear something personal as a reminder – a watch, necklace, ring, item of clothing
- Continue with/take up a hobby that was theirs – gardening, stamp collecting
- Meet up with friends, talk about your loved one

*Joy is forged in sorrow and death leads to life and grief is the road between them.*

Walter Wangerin

## The hairdresser

*At 3.00 am Sheila received a phone call from the hospital to say that Joe had died at 2.34 am.*

Sheila came home at the end of a very busy day running her hairdressing salon. It was made even busier now that they had to navigate all the rules and regulations around this new illness, Covid-19. As she walked into the house, she could hear her husband Joe coughing. It was very unusual to hear him coughing, so she went straight into the living room where she saw him holding his chest and struggling to breathe. Sheila thought he was having a heart attack. She rang her daughter, who was a nurse, who advised calling 111. Sheila rang 111, who then requested an ambulance to the house. When the ambulance arrived, the crew came into the house in full PPE, looking like Martians; it was all a bit frightening. They did various observations and decided to take Joe into hospital as a precaution, just to get him checked over. Joe felt too weak to walk to the ambulance, so they put him in a chair; Sheila gave him a peck on the cheek and said she would follow in the car. The ambulance crew told Sheila that she was not able to go to the hospital with them, but to give the hospital a ring later to see how Joe was doing. Sheila rang the hospital later that evening and was told that Joe was stable.

At 3.00 am Sheila received a phone call from the hospital to say that Joe had died at 2.34 am. He had caught Covid-19 and his breathing had rapidly deteriorated; they had done all they could to save him, but he had died.

Sheila's life changed in the course of twelve hours. One minute, she and Joe were at the stage of enjoying time with their grandchildren and working for a couple more years before being able to enjoy their retirement together. Now all of a sudden, this disease, which at the time nobody seemed to know much about, had taken her husband.

Many others have a similar story to Sheila – of not being able to be with their loved ones in hospital or when they have died. At times during the

pandemic, loved ones were prevented from visiting, encouraging, bringing hope and comfort to those who were poorly.

## Grief aspect

Like Sheila, when a loved one dies suddenly and without you present, you are catapulted into an unplanned, unwelcomed place; a place of shock, disbelief, disorientation, numbness and fog.

What probably then follows is a whole range of conversations in your head. 'Should I have done something more? Why wasn't I there when they needed me most? Were they calling for me? Have the hospital staff got the right person? Are they sure it is MY loved one? Is this just a terrible dream?'

You will experience pain that can be intensely physical as well as emotional; the pain can cause a numbness which is nature's way of protecting you. Time will be both your enemy and your best friend. You will want to turn back the clock, but you can't, and you can't imagine how you are even going to get through the next day.

Take all the pressure off. Nothing has any importance now apart from you. If you can, eat little and often, nap when you can, talk when you feel up to it. Let others spread the news and the story. Accept any offers of meals, childcare, dog walking, if you can. You will be able to bear the pain. We are all more resilient than we know or think we are.

For those of you who have experienced this kind of loss during the pandemic, you will be in shock and traumatised; numbness, disbelief and anger will no doubt follow. Doing so much of your grieving alone, in isolation, adds another layer of numbness which may take longer to heal from. As we remember the impact of lockdown and restrictions, give yourself time to go back to your period of shock. Talk through what it felt like with someone who will listen; allow yourself to revisit and express those feelings, thoughts and emotions.

## Reflection

There is a story in the gospel of Matthew (Matthew 8:23–27) where Jesus and his disciples were crossing the sea in a boat when a furious storm blew

up without warning. Jesus was asleep while the disciples were fighting to keep control of the boat. They woke him up in desperation, and he commanded the wind and the waves to be still and everything calmed down.

Jesus didn't leave the disciples during that storm. He was there. He was in it with them. The whole time.

Jesus was with you during the storm, and he will continue to be with you. He knows and understands the depths of all our pain and sorrow.

## Prayer

*Creator God, you made the earth and all that is in it. You stilled the storm and calmed the wind and waves. Be with us when we feel overwhelmed by the storms of life, keep us safe and bring us home to peace and safety. Amen*

## The bride-to-be

*Codie was so thankful he had survived, but her life had changed so much.*

23 May 2020 was a day Codie had been planning and looking forward to for most of her childhood, teens and early adulthood. It was to be her wedding day. The day she would walk down the aisle with her dad, to marry the person who she wanted to spend the rest of her life with, while her mum cried tears of happiness.

The church and the reception venue had been booked nearly two years before. A 'save the date' invitation had been sent out, and Codie and her fiancé had saved every penny to afford the deposit for their first home together.

Codie's mum, Susan, worked in a local supermarket. When the pandemic started, the managers had tried to put in all of the recommendations as soon as they could, but there was a delay in getting screens put up and in being provided with PPE. Susan caught Covid-19 in the early days of mid-March when there was very little known about it. She fought for her life for three weeks, but sadly died. It was a devastating loss to Codie and all the family.

Codie wondered whether she would be able to carry on with her special day without her mum present.

Two weeks later, Codie's dad was rushed to hospital, but in spite of everything the doctors did for him, he died a week later.

Codie's fiancé, the love of her life, was a bus driver. He came to visit her on a Tuesday evening and said he did not feel well. Codie was terrified. There was no way that she could lose anyone else. He became very sick and was admitted to hospital. He was in hospital for ten days and survived, but he was not the same man; he had lost all of his energy and his zest for life. Codie was so thankful he had survived, but her life had changed so much.

The wedding reception venue cancelled her booking and the church minister called to say they could only have 15 people at the wedding. Codie and her partner cancelled the day that they had been planning for so long.

## Grief aspect

Grief is a journey that needs to be travelled. It is not a linear journey, and there are several different elements to it that you will experience. There may be times that you go back and forth through different parts and some aspects that you may stay in for a little while. There is no end time to the journey; what is important is that you keep travelling this journey at your speed. For each person who has experienced loss during the pandemic their story is unique, and yet there is a danger of it all being lumped into a statistic and being belittled. For so many of us it is not just one loss, it is layers of loss.

For each individual there will be a whole range of different questions you may ask in anger, and all of them stem back to you not being in control of what happened. It was all out of our control. The politicians, the doctors, nurses, scientists, all were in a new place of discovering what this disease was and how they could try and control it. Your anger is exacerbated because you do not know who to aim it at. Who can give you some of the answers to 'why?' Anxiety comes with so many unanswered questions. How will I ever get through this grief? What about the rest of my family and loved ones, will they get the disease and die too? A blanket of fear covers our lives; when we step out of our front door, when we meet someone in the street, when we go to a public event, we can find ourselves asking, will I catch Covid?

This pandemic has had such an impact on all our lives. Things we believed were relatively secure to plan and look forward to, like a holiday, a wedding or a birthday party, could not be taken for granted any more. So many events, celebrations and significant days in our lives have had to be passed by.

For many people, Covid-19 has not just changed their life for a couple of years, it has changed it for the rest of their lives.

## Reflection

In the Bible, Jeremiah 29:11 says:

*‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’*

This verse means that we can take comfort in knowing that God has a plan for our lives regardless of our current situation or the suffering we may be experiencing right now. God’s love for us goes far beyond the here and now. He knows the future and he is in control.

## Prayer

*Loving God, thank you that you know all things. You know our hopes and fears, everything we have been through and all that we are experiencing now. We ask for your comfort in our sorrow and help to trust you for the future. Amen*

*Brokenness is not the end of the story. Our pain is deep, but it is not all encompassing, our loss is enormous, but it is not eternal and death is our enemy, but it does not have the final word.*

Ruth Padilla DeBorst

## The firefighter

*We were trained to put out fires and save lives. Now our job had changed.*

Ever since I was five years old I always wanted to be a firefighter. I wanted to drive the fire truck and climb the big ladders. My wish came true when I was 21 years old: I did my firefighting training and got a full-time post in a very busy fire station. I met and married a gorgeous northern lass and life was great. My shifts meant I had a lot of time at home, so when our baby girl was born, I was able to enjoy time with her.

One evening in March 2020 I was at home watching the news and said to my wife, 'I think life is about to change for everyone.' We were called into work to do more training and to learn about all the PPE equipment we had to wear when going into people's homes, as well as the huge changes that had to happen within the station. We had new rules about looking after our own health and our shift patterns, days off and rest days were now uncertain. In May two of my colleagues called in sick and we never saw them again. One died and the other survived, but had to retire on medical grounds due to long-term damage to his lungs.

We were called out to so many jobs where there was no fire, but instead we were supporting the police in domestic abuse situations. On one 'shout' we needed to rescue a mum and two children trapped in a locked room on the fourth floor. Another time, a teenager had climbed out onto the roof and was screaming that he was going to jump. We were called out to assist an ambulance crew to collect dead bodies from a block of flats where the lift had been put out of action because you could not socially distance in it. We had to descend ten flights of stairs carrying the bodies of two people who had been dead for several days.

We were trained to put out fires and save lives. Now our job had changed. The raging fire that was Covid-19 was consuming people's lives and was more than we could cope with. Our crews were depleted. We joined up with other crews just so that our machines were manned.

What I have witnessed has changed me forever. My view of humankind has changed; I thought we would all help one another in a crisis. There are pockets where that has happened BUT generally people have cared only about themselves. Some have loved lockdown and enjoyed the freedom to stay at home, but in the city the impact has been huge: the boredom of youngsters, the stress of families in high rise flats with no lift, the isolation for old people and the restrictions for little children.

I am not a social worker, a counsellor, a priest or a teacher. I am a firefighter and I have witnessed horrendous things in my 14-year career, but what I have witnessed in this pandemic has definitely traumatised me more than anything else.

## Grief aspect

The meaning of fear is ‘an unpleasant emotion caused by threat of danger, pain or harm’ ([lexico.com/definition/fear](https://www.lexico.com/definition/fear)).

When we experience loss or grief, we experience an unpleasant emotion caused by pain. Fear can paralyse us or it can make us react to protect ourselves. People like our firefighters and first responders are trained to use their adrenaline, the fight/flight/freeze hormone in the brain in order to rescue, save lives, or react in a place of danger.

When you are grieving, you are vulnerable and will be more susceptible to being fearful or frightened. You may not have lived alone for many years, you may not have driven the car or paid a bill or sorted out finances or been anywhere on your own. Fear can paralyse you and make you think you just cannot do anything. That is a normal stage to go through; but fear can also give you the determination that you will do it.

Both of these stages will be likely to happen through your journey of grief and in different situations you will react differently. For example, you may at one stage say, ‘I can’t drive to my daughter’s house because I haven’t driven there on my own before’; further down the line you will say, ‘I have overcome my fear, I know how to get to my daughter’s house.’ Then, even further down the line, you will say, ‘Not only can I drive there, but I can go to the shops and visit friends.’

Let fear be your guide and protector, listen to your body and mind. Try to think about what is rational and what is irrational, and find a trusted friend with whom to work through your fears.

## Reflection

Fear paralyses us. The most common phrase in the Bible is 'do not be afraid'. In the Christmas story these are the first words spoken by the angels appearing to Mary, and to the shepherds. In fact, 'do not be afraid' is repeated 365 times throughout the Bible, once for every day of the year!

## Prayer

*God of grace and mercy, help us to know your peace in our hearts, to trust you and not to be afraid. Amen*

## The care home nurse

*It was a life-giving, nourishing place to be, in the middle of death and dying.*

Carol is an experienced nurse, caring for residents living in a care home with dementia, complex needs and those at the end of life. The care home had managed to avoid Covid-19 until January 2021, but a new variant of the virus led to a surge in cases nationally. The vaccinations were being rolled out, but difficulties with supply meant that both residents and staff had not been vaccinated when the virus was identified in the home.

By early January, 95% of the staff were off sick. One morning, Carol arrived for her fourth consecutive long-day shift to find that she was the only nurse on duty. Even the manager was ill in bed at home, unable to speak. After a handover through a window with the last nurse who had just finished her shift and had tested positive, Carol was coming to the realisation that she was going to have to stay in the care home. She made lots of phone calls asking for help, but no agency – local or national – had any staff to send. The hospital was full, the ambulance service was understaffed, as was the local GP surgery. Now was a pivotal moment – as a prayerful Christian, Carol handed herself and her situation over to God, completely and without reserve. Immediately she felt relief – relief that she had accepted that she would be staying in the care home as the only nurse on duty, peace knowing that God would help.

Carol needed to draw on her life experience in making decisions and prioritising care for the residents. She had always looked for God in every person in front of her; in being unable to give the best care to her patients, was she neglecting God? But God said he was there, that he was caring for each and every person. He even gave her an image of Jesus sitting on the residents' beds. When Carol and the staff could not be there, Jesus was. This knowledge lifted the burden from her. It felt as if the whole care home was filled with the presence of God. As she walked through it, Carol could feel God at her right shoulder and his presence was tangible.

One Sunday morning at 7.00 am the doorbell rang and standing on the doorstep were two young Muslim men in their 20s. They had been sent from a care agency and had travelled all night from London to come and help. They were tender, compassionate, loving and patient with the residents, and devoted to their faith. The night shifts were covered by two strong, devout, Catholic Polish carers, who put their own families to one side and came in on extra shifts to support Carol and care for the residents. The staff looked after each other too; the chef checked up on Carol each morning to make sure she had eaten. It was a life-giving, nourishing place to be, in the middle of death and dying.

There were so many confirmations of God's power and presence. No sooner had Carol had a concern for a resident than the prayer was answered before it had been spoken. A hospice nurse called one day out of the blue. 'I am in the area,' she said, and she came in to provide help and give medication.

One resident, who had a strong faith in angels, had hours to live. Carol went into her room and was met with a vivid picture of a big, beautiful creature with huge wings that filled the room. As she gently reassured the lady and told her who was with her, the lady's face relaxed and softened.

Carol herself eventually caught Covid-19 and went off sick. It didn't stop her worrying about the returning staff, coming back to empty rooms and a completely different atmosphere. She talked to her local priest after that traumatic experience of living in the care home; was she imagining those things that happened? Under such stress with little food or sleep it would be easy to dismiss the events. Her priest reassured and validated her experience – God was there in that dark time.

## Grief aspect

When you have been through a bereavement or other traumatic experience, you need to talk to someone. Grief needs to be acknowledged and validated, which means it needs to be heard, felt and shared. It is important to find someone you can trust, who will listen and affirm your experience and feelings.

David Kessler, a well-known writer and expert on grief, who lost his own son to suicide, speaks about the importance of sharing your grief. This can be

hard for people who know you because it challenges them to share your pain. Remember that family members are also grieving, so some people have found it easier to talk to strangers outside of the family who are experiencing similar loss. There are a number of online groups as well as places like Good Grief Café – an informal space where people can talk and share their loss with others who understand.

## Reflection

Psalm 23 is a well-known song declaring God's faithfulness throughout the whole of life's journey. If we trust in him, he will lead us in the right ways and will provide times of rest and refreshment when we need them. He also promises to be with us in the dark times of life – when we 'walk through the valley of the shadow of death', as one version of the Bible puts it. Carol and her staff were in that dark place, but she knew that God was there too in a real and tangible way. We do not all experience God's presence quite like Carol did, but he is with us whether we are aware of him or not. If you can trust God in the dark times and hand yourself over to him, as Carol did, he will not let you down.

## Prayer

*Loving God, thank you that you have promised to be with us always and never to leave us. We pray for all our care workers who lovingly look after people in care homes and in their own homes. Please give them the strength they need to continue to care with love, compassion and tenderness. Amen*

*Hope is the last thing to die.*

Portuguese proverb

## Community lament

*We didn't know if Karl was going to live or die.*

On 30 March 2020, Karl Gray, a Salvation Army officer, posted some words of encouragement on Facebook for his congregation.

'This week could be a challenging time for the whole country, so stay strong. God will keep us strong as we stay focused on him.'

Four days later, Karl was rushed to hospital in an ambulance, struggling to breathe and with a sky-high temperature. On arrival, he was put into a medically induced coma and on a ventilator. Karl – who was never ill – had Covid-19, which attacked his internal organs, putting him on the critical list. His wife Ruth could do nothing but follow her husband's advice: stay strong and pray. 'We didn't know if Karl was going to live or die.'

Karl has no memories of the time he spent in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) of Homerton University Hospital – but Ruth can remember everything. 'I remember seeing reports about coronavirus on the news,' says Ruth. 'I wasn't dismissive of it, but I thought that if it reached the UK then we would be able to cope with it. I didn't think it would be serious. It felt like a virus that was happening a long way away. To be honest, I barely gave it a second thought.'

For three and a half weeks, Karl was in a medically induced coma on a ventilator. It took two weeks for doctors to begin weaning him off the sedation drugs once he started improving. After five and a half weeks in ICU Karl's muscles had deteriorated so much that he could no longer walk. Transferred to the respiratory ward, Karl developed a urine infection and was delirious for 24 hours. Ruth had reached breaking point; 'I rang the hospital in hysterics, saying: "I've had enough of this. I've not seen Karl for six weeks. I need to see him!"'

A nurse met Ruth and her daughter and walked them to a window through which they could see Karl and say hello. Two days later, Karl was well

enough to be moved to a rehab ward and on Friday 29 May, eight weeks to the day after Karl had gone into hospital, he was allowed home. He managed to walk out of the ward, very slowly, and the staff lined the corridor, clapping and bashing tambourines in celebration.

In October, when Karl was fit enough to return to work, he went back to the ICU at Homerton University Hospital to thank the staff for saving his life. He often thinks of them and reflects on how the events have changed him.

‘I’m much more emotional than I used to be,’ he says. ‘I cry more – both tears of sadness and tears of joy. I also find that the small stuff doesn’t wind me up as much. So what if a car is blocking the road and I can’t get through? None of that stuff matters. What matters is waking up every morning and thanking God for today. Tomorrow is never guaranteed – so we need to be grateful for each new day we are given.’

## Grief aspect

We must not underestimate how seeing someone we know going through a terrible time affects us. I want to call it the ripple effect. When someone in the community suffers a trauma, the whole community is affected and people respond in different ways; some offer practical help, some organise vigils, some protest, some pray, some cry on behalf of the loved ones. It is important to recognise the effect on the whole community.

Karl and many others like him will journey through a myriad of emotions and feelings that will be a part of his future. Shame, guilt, fear, joy, thankfulness, sometimes all in one day.

Ruth also suffered trauma. She lost her brother to Covid-19, and almost lost her husband. Her role in the community meant that many people were looking to her for information, for guidance, direction, hope and support. All the while she was coping with her exhaustion, fears and worries about Karl.

## Reflection

We may feel that we must keep our sadness to ourselves, keep a ‘stiff upper lip’ and not be overcome by emotion. The psalms of lament found in the Bible are songs and poems in which the writer cries out to God in times of

deep distress and despair, asking him to intervene, to save and to comfort. Of the 150 psalms in the Bible, there are more of lament than any other type. If you want to read more, Psalm 3, 6 and 13 are individual psalms of lament and Psalm 12 and 44 are communal laments.

## Prayer

*Heavenly Father, we thank you for all the wonderful, amazing people who care for us and provide all the services that enable us to do life. We pray for safety, protection and blessing upon them and their loved ones. Amen*

*What matters most is your love and connection to others.*

## The husband

*I was alone with my loss, grief and thoughts, surrounded by memories and pictures. How was I going to get through lockdown?*

My wife was diagnosed with terminal cancer in March 2020. We were instructed to self-isolate, so we did. During the time of my wife's illness, my daughters provided full-time care for her. As her condition deteriorated, the healthcare team would come in and out of the house all dressed in PPE – nurses, doctors, carers, physiotherapists, occupational therapists. We had such a wonderful provision of care and everyone gave my wife the very best attention. She died after seven months, and sadly we were only able to have a funeral with 30 people. This was so difficult as my wife was loved by hundreds of people and they all would have wanted to be at her funeral.

On the day of the funeral, I saw my children and grandchildren and a few other close family friends. We were not allowed to have a wake, so after the service everyone took their own 'tea in a box' and dispersed to their own homes. I went back to an empty house. The house was so silent, no beloved wife, no daughters and no carers coming now. I was alone with my loss, grief and thoughts, surrounded by memories and pictures in what had once been such a warm, welcoming home. How was I ever to get through the months and months ahead of me in lockdown?

Time on my own played havoc with my mind and memory; I wrestled with my conscience, battled regrets and played music that brought back memories. To the outside world via phone and Zoom I put on a brave face, but when alone I was broken.

One week slid into another, one month into another; Christmas passed just like any other day, all on my own; my 80th birthday came and went without celebration. Life was no longer being lived; I was just existing. It was as if a pause button had been pressed.

Having got used to spending time on my own and with little change in my

daily routine, I had lost the confidence to tackle anything new. My wife had done everything for me and so any new thing had to be learned. This took a lot of courage and effort and most of the time I put off doing it. After a year, I plucked up the courage to go away to my daughter's for a few days. This was to be the turning point. I packed my own suitcase for the first time, drove a long journey on my own, adjusted to a new daily routine and loved being around a lot more people. This gave me energy, hope and a new outlook on the rest of my life, and I began to plan to do more things on my own.

## Grief aspect

Grief is a journey which we are thrust into, and for each of us the destination is unfamiliar and unknown; we don't know when or if we will ever arrive, but what is important is that we keep moving on that journey at whatever pace we can.

As we read in this story, for those who have lost a loved one during the pandemic and who now live alone (often older people), the impact of bereavement and grief has been enormous. Their grief journey has been suspended.

Suspended grief can mean two different things. One can be caused by not being able to mourn your loved one due to them being missing, there being no body or you not being able to bury them. The second can be caused by not being able to process grief due to external circumstances – for example, because of the pandemic many people have been unable to attend a funeral of their family member and thus were unable to experience what others in grief outside of the pandemic will experience.

Part of walking through grief is experiencing and learning to handle one situation after another without your loved one by your side. Initially it will be coping with the empty house, eating a meal or watching TV alone. Then going out, shopping or to a club or to church, as a person alone instead of as a couple.

During lockdown, many older people stayed at home and didn't see anyone for months. For those in grief, they have not had the opportunity to experience the first steps on the grieving journey, to talk to people about their loved one, to join in with social activities or to go to familiar places. The grief journey will therefore take more time.

## Reflection

The Bible tells the story of a father, Jacob, who lost his favourite son Joseph because his other brothers sold him into slavery (you can read the story in Genesis 37). Jacob grieved for his son deeply. Years later, Joseph became a powerful leader in Egypt and met his brothers again. They did not recognise Joseph and he did not initially reveal his identity to them. Jacob, by now an old man, had been carrying his grief for his son all those years, unable to find peace. When he discovered his son was alive, he was full of confusion, hope, anger and joy.

Although Joseph was found alive, Jacob had experienced suspended grief. He had been unable to process his grief because of the circumstances of Joseph's 'death', but also then had to process the grief of those lost years without his beloved son.

## Prayer

*Compassionate God, Psalm 34 says you are close to the broken-hearted and those who are crushed in spirit. We pray for all those who are lonely and isolated, who grieve alone. Come close to them in their distress and bring people alongside them who will be friends and comforters. Amen*

*Death ends a life, not a relationship. All the love you created is still there. All the memories are still there. You live on in the hearts of everyone you have touched and nurtured while you were here.*

Morrie Schwartz

## The teacher

*I am no longer primarily a senior schoolteacher, I am also a pastor.*

During the pandemic I worked every day, and probably harder and longer hours than I had normally done (which was already many, many hours outside of lessons). We had to learn a completely new way of teaching which none of my colleagues or team leaders or heads of departments had been trained to do, so we were all learning together.

But the most important issue that we were faced with was the mental health of our students. Many of my students were from privileged backgrounds, but were in very difficult places. We saw a huge increase in mental health disorders, an increase in self harm, eating disorders and more.

The priorities for staff changed; student attendance was key and it was vital to record if a student was missing and if so to follow it up until they were found either at home or somewhere else. If they could not be found, then the family and police were informed straight away. As they all had to sit in the same place, it was very obvious if a student was absent. Some of the students were so troubled that they were put on suicide watch, and we had to monitor their mood, actions, responses and communications during the school day.

These new responsibilities increased our levels of exhaustion enormously; the breadth of our role went way beyond teaching and the learning capacity of our students. New members of staff were brought in to support us teachers in providing pastoral care.

When tragedy did happen and we had a number of suicides, it rocked the whole school; everyone was affected. We were given bereavement training so that we could support the students in our classes. I am no longer primarily a senior schoolteacher, I am also a pastor.

## Grief aspect

Cumulative grief is grieving for multiple losses experienced in a short space of time. Losses are not just the death of a loved one: it can be the loss of a friend, a job, a home or anything that is familiar and secure. Often, when you have experienced numerous losses, you can become numb or just in a fog because it is too painful to deal with the reality of the situation.

Each loss you have experienced needs to be recognised and given time to process. If you have experienced a number of losses over a short period, you may find it helpful to take time out and remember each one individually, recognising that each will need its own time and space to acknowledge. Your relationship with the person or circumstance you have lost will determine how much time you will need to spend processing and going through the journey of grief. Cumulative grief will be time-consuming and exhausting, so you will need to give yourself grace, understanding and patience.

As a keyworker, you are often expected to keep going to maintain normality for others. In doing this you can deny your own emotions, feelings and reactions. It is important that you tell someone how you are processing, or not processing, your grief because at some point you will need to.

## Reflection

In the Bible, in 1 Peter 5:7, it says,

*Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.*

There is nothing too big for God to handle; no matter what your circumstances he is able to listen, love and lament with you. God may well use people to carry out his purposes. When people offer to make a meal for you, take the dog for a walk, do your ironing, or just sit and listen, take them up on their offer. You are blessing them as well as them being a blessing to you.

## Prayer

*Thank you, God, for all who teach and care for children and students; please give them strength to cope in difficult times, and wisdom and discernment to know how best to help each of their pupils. Amen*

## The ministry of presence

*Doreen began to cry and said, 'Don't worry, they are happy tears. This is the best day since your grandad died.'*

As a chaplain, I was taught that the basis of my ministry was incarnational – bringing Jesus to the situation I was in – not necessarily my words or actions, but just being present.

An older lady, Doreen lost her husband during the early part of lockdown in 2020; her family lived a long way away, so she became very lonely. From a distance I watched her shrivel physically, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually. The few conversations we had on the phone in those early months highlighted that Doreen was experiencing the deep impact of grief.

As the months continued and as lockdown lifted, I began to visit her; the first time we met face to face I just sat while she told me in detail what had happened as if it were yesterday. The second time I visited, she cried and wailed, expressing how lonely she was; on the third visit she shared how she had fallen out with all the family and was making rash decisions to sell her house, move to a new area, change her will and give all her money away.

Doreen had always made excuses not to go and visit her daughter, until one day, having had a call from her grandson, she decided she would go. She set off, full of fear and trepidation, and hours later arrived to a warm loving hug from her daughter.

Sarah, her daughter, was also apprehensive. Her mum was a frail old lady who used a walking stick and Sarah's life was full. She worked part-time and saw a lot of her children and grandchildren, was very involved in her church and always had people coming and going in the house. Sarah's two daughters and their children came to see their Nanna; it was the first time Doreen had met her great-grandchildren. The baby was handed over to Nanna for a cuddle. Doreen held the baby with so much love and affection; she began to cry, looked up to her granddaughter and said, 'Don't worry, they are happy tears. This is the best day since your grandad died.'

The following days were filled with people coming and going in the house, all stopping to have a chat with Doreen, or taking her out for a coffee. Seeing the great-grandchildren every day, taking them to the park, having meals together with lots of laughter and stories and being able to talk about Papa: Doreen slept like a baby every night and was happily exhausted. There was an emotional goodbye and Doreen found it hard to put into words just what the week had meant to her. Her beaming smile said it all!

The transformation in Doreen was miraculous and all down to the presence and company of people. When she returned home, she was a totally different woman. Physically she was energetic and confident (she put that down to running after the great-grandchildren and going up and down the stairs every day) and she no longer used her walking stick. Emotionally she was happy, positive and looking forward to the future. Spiritually the time away had lifted her too; spending time with other people of faith and talking about her faith had reminded her who she was. We need people around us – we are not meant to be islands. God has created us to live in community.

## Grief aspect

There comes a time in your journey of grief where you know that you have moved on to a place of acceptance. You are no longer in that deep place of shock, bewilderment, distress or confusion, but you have come to a place where you practise ‘the presence of absence’. This is recognising that even though you will always long for your loved one to be with you, you accept that you will not experience their presence again.

This is a significant part of your grief process. It is a time where you can begin to build a life again with the memories of your loved one always with you. You will have grown so much through the experience of your loss and bereavement and now will be the time when you grow even more. Being around people – family, children, neighbours, friends – will help you to reach out and experience new things on your own. You can challenge yourself in accomplishing new things and reward yourself for tackling difficult situations. The surprise for you will be experiencing emotions which you thought had left you long ago, such as joy, peace, laughter and happiness. You will need to brush aside the feelings of guilt when these emotions come: you are allowed to be happy, it does not diminish your loss one iota.

Well done! Grief is a lonely journey we will all travel, but you are a richer person for it.

Remember: the relationship with your loved one will never end. They are woven into your identity.

## Reflection

God has a particular care for older people and children on their own and the Bible mentions it often in both the Old and New Testaments.

*A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling.*

PSALM 68:5

*The church should take loving care of women whose husbands have died if they don't have anyone else to help them. But if they have children or grandchildren, these are the ones who should take the responsibility, for kindness should begin at home, supporting needy parents. This is something that pleases God very much.*

1 TIMOTHY 5:3-4 (TLB)

## Prayer

*Father God, we thank you for giving us our family. Please help us to cherish them, treasure each moment and memory and celebrate the time we have with them. Amen*

## The supporter

*My parents have not only lost a grandchild and two great-grandchildren, but also a brother and an uncle, all within a few weeks.*

Jemma and her family are from Ghana; her parents are the pastors of a church in London, and they are a large, loving family. Jemma is a nurse specialising in dementia care and has worked in hospitals all her career. During the first year of the pandemic Jemma's career came to an abrupt halt due to bullying in the workplace and racial abuse. Jemma decided to retire, but found the whole incident very distressing.

In March of the following year Jemma's family were to experience great sadness and grief. As the eldest of five children and the aunt to many nieces and nephews, Jemma supported a number of her family throughout the pandemic, including her parents.

Her niece, a single parent, was struggling with her own mental health and was also under a great deal of stress due to having two severely autistic children to care for on her own. It all became too much for her and led to her taking her own life and that of her two children through a house fire.

The whole family were devastated and were thrown into the unknown world of police investigations, interrogations and questioning in the midst of deep grief and confusion. The father of the children is a Muslim and chose to bury them at a place not shared with the rest of the family.

Jemma's parents have received a great deal of support from their church congregation, but the impact of such a trauma has had a detrimental effect upon relationships within the family. Jemma says the ripple effect through the family has been huge, and it is only by God's grace that they are functioning. 'My parents have not only lost a grandchild, and two great-grandchildren, but also a brother and an uncle, all within a few weeks.' Jemma has now had to organise care for her parents as their physical health has deteriorated so rapidly that they are no longer able to live independently.

## Grief aspect

Jemma's story raises so many issues of loss and grief – racial abuse, the loss of her job and the end of her career, mental health issues, caring for disabled children, lack of support, suicide, the criminal process, different religious practices, family breakdown and trauma.

One of the most common responses to this deep traumatic bereavement is to blame God or blame someone else. It is a natural outlet to try to find someone or something to focus on to find reasons for what has no explanation.

Mental health issues have increased exponentially throughout the pandemic and many people 'just about coped', but so often it is the straw that breaks the camel's back. The tiniest thing which seems insignificant will be what tips someone over the edge. For the family or those close to them they will have to process blame, guilt, regret and fear that may lead to them struggling with their own mental health.

The thread that weaves through Jemma's story is both her and her family's strong faith in God and the support of their church community. In these extreme situations of grief, finding a community or a group of people to talk, listen and share with is essential. Another aspect of grief to be aware of is that of delayed grief; if such trauma is not processed it may well be triggered through an incident that happens months or years later. There are layers of loss which will need unpacking, but not necessarily in any sequential order.

## Reflection

The Psalms are a book of prayers and poems to God – in trouble, in illness, in persecution and in good times with rejoicing. We can shout and rage at God; he can take it. When the terrible things keep happening and we feel we can't take any more, God is there.

*How long, O Lord? Will you forget me for ever?  
How long will you hide your face from me?  
How long must I bear pain in my soul,  
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?*

PSALM 13:1-2 (NRSV)

The psalm ends with the author acknowledging God's unfailing love and goodness.

## Prayer

*O God, when I am surrounded by troubles and I don't know how to go on, help me to continue to trust in your unfailing love. Amen*

## The police officer

*For us as police officers it has been such a challenge to remain focused on our work and committed to our job.*

When the pandemic began, Lara was living with her grandparents who were extremely vulnerable, and as a police officer, in contact with the public and investigating domestic violence cases, she was very concerned about putting her family at risk. She asked at work for advice about any help available in the situation, but was told to carry on as usual, so at the end of each shift, Lara made sure that she was scrubbed down from head to toe in order to protect her grandparents.

One of the greatest impacts upon Lara and her colleagues was not being seen as a priority for vaccination. The police were on the front line and putting themselves at risk every day; they felt devalued, let down, ignored and could not understand why the vaccine was given to NHS and care workers, but not offered to them. They felt that they were not respected enough to carry out their frontline roles in a protected way.

The police continued to respond to home calls, accidents, road incidents and so on – they were in constant contact with the general public. Lara said, ‘There were shortages of PPE at the start, so we had to buy or make our own and we only wore it if we knew that someone was positive. Now we wear paper masks all the time.’

The other big issue was that rest days and off-duty time were cancelled, so every shift was short-staffed due to officers being off sick or isolating. ‘One in four of my colleagues were off work at any one time; this had a huge impact upon our workload and increased the stress so much. We earned a lot of money through overtime, but morale was really low. For us as police officers it has been such a challenge to remain focused on our work and committed to our job.’

When lockdown began, things became quieter in some ways – fewer traffic incidents and burglaries – but there was a huge increase in domestic abuse.

## Grief aspect

‘The study of moral injury began with research and clinical work involving US Army personnel and veterans. Moral injury results from extraordinary, critical life events during which a person fails to prevent or witnesses actions that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations.’  
[leb.fbi.gov/articles/featured-articles/moral-injury-in-police-work](http://leb.fbi.gov/articles/featured-articles/moral-injury-in-police-work).

Research found that greater exposure to morally injurious events correlated significantly with guilt, frustration, depression, shame and loss of spirituality or a sense of rejection. Having to continue to interact with the public with no protection against Covid-19 affected Lara and her police colleagues and generated feelings of depression, exhaustion and stress.

## Reflection

Bishop Richard Jackson, drawing on the original thinking of Kierkegaard, said, ‘Life is lived forwards and understood backwards.’

It will be years and years until we unpack all that we have experienced and lived through during this pandemic. People from all walks of life have suffered from moral injury, which is different from experiencing post-traumatic stress syndrome. Moral injury is caused by a situation that has affected your moral judgement that your own conscience disagrees with. Moral injury can manifest itself in similar ways to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), such as anger, depression and addictions, but can also affect people’s emotions with feelings of guilt, shame and disappointment, because they failed to act or because of a particular action they took.

Many of our keyworkers will have experienced moral injury and there will need to be specific help and support in the months and years to come, to enable them to process what they have witnessed and lived through. For some it will have changed their commitment to their chosen career or vocation. In the meantime, we in society need to be kind, gentle, thankful and appreciative for all those who went above the call of duty to protect us, care for us and save us during the pandemic, at great expense to themselves.

## Prayer

*O God of justice, thank you for all who work in the police and law enforcement services. We pray that you will keep them safe as they work and give them wisdom and discernment to understand the situations that they have to deal with. Amen*

## Furlough – the blessing and the cost

*I thank God that he spared my life; I believe hundreds of people were praying for me, but the person who suffered the most was my lovely husband.*

In March 2020 the government announced a new scheme to support employers by providing funds to enable them to put their staff on 'garden leave'. This was a welcome relief for many businesses, but for employees it had mixed blessings.

As a specialist working for a Christian charity supporting older people, sadly we were not permitted to do any work, either paid or voluntary, for our employer. This was difficult for us as a team because there was so much we could have done to support communities up and down the UK. At the same time my mother was diagnosed as terminally ill. I had the joy and privilege of being able to care for her in her own home for seven months during lockdown until she passed away peacefully in October 2020. We buried my mum on Remembrance Day, but sadly only immediate family and a few close friends were allowed to attend the funeral.

A couple of days later I became very unwell with chest pains and was rushed into hospital and put in the 'Red Zone' (Covid infectious). After examination and treatment, I was discharged, but seven days later I became very unwell. I could not get breath into my lungs. We called 111 for advice and within minutes there was an ambulance crew in our bedroom. I was back again in the 'Red Zone', but this time I was admitted and put on a machine to assist me with my breathing. All I remember from that period of time is looking around the ward I was in and thinking how poorly everyone looked, never knowing that I too was that poorly. Praise God I recovered enough to be discharged home, but I remained unwell for a further twelve weeks, mainly struggling with breathing.

I thank God that he spared my life; I believe hundreds of people were praying for me, but the person who suffered the most was my lovely husband. He felt helpless and so far away from me when I was in hospital and then when I came home, he lovingly cared for me. I now have long Covid which has meant that I have had to make changes to my lifestyle. However, God had more in store for me.

A year after having been put on furlough we were given the sad news that our roles with the charity were being made redundant. However, at the same time, the trustees of a charity that I had founded four years previously invited me to take up the part-time role of chief executive.

## Grief aspect

Loss comes in all kinds of disguises and should not be belittled. Someone who has lost their job, career, identity, purpose, routine and security can experience just the same grief feelings as someone who has experienced a bereavement. During the pandemic hundreds of thousands of people were thrown into new situations that caused them great anxiety, fear, anger, depression, confusion and exhaustion. Many parents had to juggle home-schooling, home-working and running the home. Many Christian leaders up and down the land were trying to figure out how to support their congregations and fulfil their calling and passion to reach out to the community, meeting people's needs whether spiritual or practical.

Grief also may take a while to manifest itself and issues may come as a surprise when least expected. Christmas is often a time when memories are jolted or emotions triggered through carols or Christmas songs. These are the times to allow yourself to express those feelings. It might be hard to explain to those around you why you are a bit emotional, but it is better to let the feelings out than to suppress them.

## Reflections

This contemporary version of a verse in the Bible speaks about the times in our life when we just do not know what to do or say, and how God works all things that happen in our life for good.

*Meanwhile, the moment we get tired in the waiting, God's Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don't know how or what to pray, it doesn't matter. He does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans. He knows us far better than we know ourselves, knows our pregnant condition, and keeps us present before God. That's why we can be so sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good.*

ROMANS 8:28 (MSG)

## Prayer

Jesus said, 'Pray then in this way:

*Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name.*

*Your kingdom come.*

*Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

*Give us this day our daily bread.*

*And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.*

*And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.'*

MATTHEW 6:9-13 (NRSV)

*We all have a fear of loss, but we will all suffer loss.*

## The vicar

*It was a very difficult time. Church was closed;  
I lost who I was. Was I a mum, a wife, a vicar, a neighbour?*

Little did I know what God was going to do in my life, especially as I had not even acknowledged he existed for 39 years.

Through a random encounter I found myself on an Alpha Course, which radically changed my life! I found a great church where I was encouraged to grow in my faith and learn more about the Bible, but I always felt there was more. One Sunday I was inspired by a woman preacher who spoke about a calling into ministry, and I knew then that was what I was meant to do. With the support of my family, I went through the process of selection, completed my training and was ordained as a priest in 2017.

My curacy was in a small village parish with three small congregations. Three years later I was delighted to be given my own church in a beautiful location in Derbyshire. My family and I moved into the vicarage and spent a couple of weeks getting settled in; the children found their way to new schools and college. My husband managed to get a transfer with his job which enabled him to commute to work. All had fallen into place.

My first service and sermon in January went really well; I knew I was where I was meant to be. It was an elderly congregation and a number of people in the parish found it really difficult adjusting to a new vicar, especially a woman with a young family. The previous vicar had been at the church for 36 years and was much missed. I knew I had a lot of work to do to win them over, but I was looking forward to visiting them in their homes and getting to know them.

By the end of February, listening to the news, I sensed that we had challenging times ahead. In March the country went into lockdown, and I was desperately trying to find out from the archdeacon and the diocese what we had to do. After a few weeks we were told that the church had to close. All activities, weddings, funerals, christenings were cancelled and no home visits.

Schools and colleges were closed and work was being sent home, so I now needed to home-school my middle child who has dyslexia, as well as my youngest, aged five. My eldest son stayed in his room hanging out with his old mates online because he hadn't yet made friends at his new college. My husband was working from home and using our bedroom as his office. I was now working from home, everyone was trying to find their space, there was nowhere quiet to go and sit and think, let alone pray.

Lockdown brought about huge changes for everyone to adjust to. How was I to meet the needs of all those people in the parish, my family and myself? I had no answers for the constant barrage of questions from my parishioners; it was exhausting. I hadn't had the time before Covid-19 hit to build relationships within the parish and nor did I have the knowledge, experience and technical skills to enable me to meet all the demands of this new situation.

It was a very difficult time. Church was closed; I lost who I was. Was I a mum, a wife, a vicar, a neighbour? They all needed me.

## Grief aspect

When the pandemic took off and lockdown was suddenly imposed on the country, everything changed; the new vicar felt ineffective both as the new vicar in the parish and as a mum, having to home-school her children. The changed circumstances and new demands in her parish and at home knocked her confidence and her sense of her own identity.

If your husband or wife dies, are you still married? If your child dies, are you still a mum? When you lose someone close, there are new situations that you have to face and adjust to. You lose one identity, but have a new identity or role forced on you. This new identity requires different skills which you have to cope with in a time of deep distress.

So often it is the unexpected person, someone who you did not know before, or someone who has no expectations of you but sees you as the person you are now; that person comes alongside and hears who you are today and offers to help you with what you need now.

In your place of loss, look out for that person. It may be a neighbour who you have only said 'hello' to; it may be someone who is a widow or widower

who you have never noticed before, but they understand. What is important is that you reach out to someone who you feel safe with, who will support and help you to learn new skills.

## Reflection

Often our identity is wrapped up in what we do or where we live, but our identity as Christians is rooted and grounded in Jesus. The Bible tells us we are created and loved by God (Psalm 139), that Jesus died for us (John 3:16) and that we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing (Ephesians 1:3–14). Psalm 23 talks of God, the good shepherd, being with us as we walk through ‘the valley of the shadow of death’. During times of change, confusion and self-doubt, we can be sure of the presence of the God who made us and loves us.

## Prayer

*Eternal God, when life events rock our foundations to the core and we don't know how to cope, we call to you, 'Help me, God.' Help us to trust in you and in your presence. Amen*

## New ways for new days

*From the very early days of the pandemic we knew that God was taking us into new pastures, adventures into the unknown and to a place that we would all become richer in our relationships with God and one another.*

Kevin Vickers is a pastor of a multicultural church in south London. As a church leader, Kevin knew that during the pandemic they needed to make changes to their church structure in five key areas to be adaptable, effective and sustainable. These five key areas became the foundation pillars that they would seek to do well:

- 1 Pastoral ministry
- 2 Discipleship
- 3 Communication
- 4 Sunday worship
- 5 Evangelism

In order to visit people in their homes, the church introduced 'Pedal Pastors'. Visitors from the church would cycle to people's houses and stand at the garden gate or on doorsteps bringing encouragement and support through scripture and prayer as well as delivering any practical necessities.

During the pandemic, numerous families in the church suffered huge losses, trials and bereavement. Kevin says, 'We believed that God wanted to grow our faith as a church community and that it was to be bigger than following any rules. Often we put ourselves on the frontline, making ourselves vulnerable in order to comfort, care and pastor those in need. We trusted God in his faithfulness, love and power to protect us as we ministered to others. We were not careless or flippant, but responsive.'

'Discipling our congregation and those who joined us during the pandemic was paramount. Feeding them with God's word, by providing them with bitesize meaty chunks of scripture in teaching, happened via Facebook as well as Zoom. People loved the fact that they could watch it anytime – day

or night – and pass it on to their friends and family and discuss the teaching together.’

Learning new ways to communicate was exciting, challenging and fulfilling. ‘As a church, we now know one another better than ever we did before. We have shared our stories with each other, met in smaller groups, communicated more frequently, and discovered new spiritual gifts and talents within our congregation. People who we did not know had musical gifts led worship in a small online group; people who had never prayed aloud in church became active prayer leaders.

‘Sunday has always been a day when we met to worship God together and this remained a priority. Gathering as a group of people to meet with God, learn together and encourage one another continued week by week, only it got better. Our meetings became richer, more diverse, interactive and inspiring.

‘The opportunities to share our faith throughout the pandemic became so much more frequent. We became familiar with online platforms such as Facebook and Zoom and were delighted to see people from all over the world tune in and listen to our services. Our church family grew. As a pastor, I loved the opportunities to meet with wider circles of people to encourage them, teach them and share the good news of Jesus with them.’

Kevin continues, ‘As a pastor, I have seen people in my congregation become trophies of faith and grace. They have walked through such challenging situations, but held on to God and their testimony gives God all the glory. One of the things I believe God wants us to do is to keep telling our stories. My role as a leader is to equip the saints, the people in the congregation, for service. It is no longer about what is going on at the front of the church in the service, everyone needs to be participating and involved; we are to be creative in how we *do church*. We are to move away from the “stars” on Sunday, even move away perhaps from having a service. Church has to be different, otherwise we have learnt nothing through this pandemic. We need to be listening to God, to hear what is on his heart.’

## Grief aspect

In the Old Testament, when the Israelites left Egypt, they plundered jewellery and clothing from the Egyptians who were desperate to see them go. Many years later, these materials would be used to build the house of God.

What are we plundering from lockdown, from the pandemic? How is God going to use that in years to come? We need a 'tent' mentality, to be light on our feet, ready to move where God is leading.

## Reflection

Psalm 30 is a song of thanksgiving for recovery from grave illness.

*I will exalt you, Lord,  
for you lifted me out of the depths  
and did not let my enemies gloat over me.  
Lord my God, I called to you for help,  
and you healed me.  
You, Lord, brought me up from the realm of the dead;  
you spared me from going down to the pit.*

*Sing the praises of the Lord, you his faithful people;  
praise his holy name.  
For his anger lasts only a moment,  
but his favour lasts a lifetime;  
weeping may stay for the night,  
but rejoicing comes in the morning.*

PSALM 30:1-5

Kevin says, 'One of the biggest things I have learned is to weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice. We can be alongside those who are weeping and those who are joyful at the same time; we need to be doing it together and be comfortable with it.'

## Prayer

*Father God, as you comfort those who mourn, help us draw close to those who are sad and grieving, and bring them your love and peace. Amen*

## The junior doctor

*It is hard to be the bearer of bad news and to take away people's hope.*

Felicity is a junior doctor in a busy teaching hospital. In the autumn of 2020, the pandemic was escalating again. There was no national lockdown in place at that time, but there was a huge disparity between the news reports on television and radio, and the actual situation in the hospital, which was filling up fast with sick people.

Elderly patients admitted with Covid-19 deteriorated quickly; even when given 100% oxygen (the maximum amount) they struggled and were not always suitable for an intensive care bed because of their other pre-existing medical conditions.

On a particular weekend afternoon, Felicity was looking after a ward of sick older people; four of them deteriorated very quickly and she had to contact each of the families with the bad news that their relatives were probably not going to live through the night. It is hard to be the bearer of bad news and to take away people's hope. The news for the families was particularly devastating because, having not seen their loved one recently due to lockdown, they had no idea of how ill they had become. It was a terrible shock to hear they were about to die.

Felicity invited the relatives to come in and say goodbye to their loved ones. At that time, the hospital policy was strictly one relative only per patient because of the high risk of the relative themselves catching Covid-19. The relatives had to wear full PPE and isolate at home afterwards. One lady, struggling for breath, on oxygen and not appropriate for a bed in intensive care, wanted to see her husband and her daughter. The nursing team discussed the situation with the doctor; the nursing staff were afraid of the relatives catching Covid-19.

Felicity discussed it with her senior colleague and they decided to allow the lady's husband and her daughter to come in. The relatives of the other

patients also came in. Two of the patients were awake and able to say goodbye to their loved ones.

On other occasions, Felicity often phoned relatives on her own or the patient's phone and sat with the dying whose family were unable to come in and see them.

## Grief aspect

There are two aspects of grief in this story. One is about compassion and the other is collective grief. We are used to doing things in a certain way, following the rules; if we ignore or bend them, we can get into trouble. What was the right action in that situation on the ward? Was it to follow the rules and reduce the risk of another person catching Covid-19? Or to show compassion and allow the patient to see and say goodbye to her husband and daughter, but also to enable a daughter to give support and comfort to her grieving elderly father? Compassion will always win over rules and often there is a way to do both.

The other aspect is that of collective grief. Sharing our grief is vital for healthy processing, whether in a family or in a team. Felicity carried a huge burden of care for her patients, as all healthcare staff do; she has flashbacks of difficult situations, and like all her colleagues, is exhausted. The ward staff kept their emotions under control while on duty during these difficult weeks and months, but they let their guard down at the end of the shift, often sharing their feelings and their tears over tea and cake in the staff room. Sharing your experience with others who are experiencing the same is healthy and helpful both in the short term and longer term.

## Reflection

There are many examples of Jesus bending the rules.

A leper came to him [Jesus], begging him, and kneeling he said to him, 'If you choose, you can make me clean.' Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched the man, and said to him, 'I do choose. Be made clean!' Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.

MARK 2:40-42 (NRSV)

Jesus deliberately touched the man – something not done in those days when leprosy was thought to be very contagious and those who had it were shunned and cast out of normal society. But he had compassion on the man, knowing what he was going through, how he had to live in social isolation, without the comfort of human touch. Jesus' compassion was endless. His priority was for the person, not the rule.

## Prayer

*God of compassion, thank you for all who work in our healthcare services, for everything they do to care for their patients. Give them extra reserves of energy, courage and compassion in the face of overwhelming challenges.  
Amen*

## The wife

*Life is too short, just do it, live life to the full.*

Sue and John were 'second time round-ers'. They met later in life and married, always held hands, wrote each other messages on the kitchen whiteboard, told each other daily they loved each other and were so happy being together.

Shortly after their wedding, John's dad died, then his youngest son was killed in a car accident. This rocked John; he decided that life was too short, so he took early retirement from his job and they moved to a different area, spent time renovating a town house and enjoyed travel to see family. Three years previously they had enjoyed a big trip to New York and Australia visiting family, celebrating his 60th birthday.

In September 2020, having completed a busy two and a half years of renovations on their house and fed up with lockdown, they decided to go to Turkey for a holiday. The resort was clean and quiet and they enjoyed the break. On return, they went into isolation, which was not a hardship as they were enjoying life in their new home.

On 30 September, John started feeling unwell. They drove to get a PCR test and talked to the GP who advised taking vitamin C and D, but John didn't get any better. That night he had a fever and couldn't sleep, and Sue called 111. The next afternoon he walked – unaided – into an ambulance and went to hospital. Tests confirmed that he had Covid-19, but the next day John wasn't responding to oxygen and was quickly transferred to intensive care. Sue had daily telephone conversations with the consultant who said John was critically ill and the situation could go 'either way at any time'.

Sue also came down with Covid-19 and continued to isolate at home, but her condition deteriorated and she was also admitted to hospital and put into isolation on the respiratory ward. While they were both in hospital, they were able to communicate by texting and with video calls. After a few days Sue was well enough to go home.

One week after he had been admitted to hospital, the doctors decided to put John into an induced coma and on to a ventilator. The situation continued to get worse; John's kidneys started to fail and he was put on dialysis. Then one lung collapsed, though the doctors managed to get it reinflated. Sue had a call at 3.00 am to go into the hospital. John's sons joined her and stayed with him while Sue went home for a while. At 11.30 am they gathered on the ward again; all John's organs were failing now, including his brain. No one could say whether he would be able to recover, or what his condition might be like after all he had been through.

John was only 63, a father and grandfather, a respected colleague from his first career and working as a business coach while studying for a PhD. He would have hated to be dependent, so the decision was made to switch off the ventilator and let him go. It was 20 October.

The funeral had to be organised by phone and only 30 of his close family and friends were able to attend as the country was in lockdown. Thanks to technology they were able to livestream the service from the crematorium, so that family in Australia and colleagues could join in. There were no flowers and no wake, but Sue organised candles in gift bags for everyone, asking people to light a candle that night in memory of John.

## Grief aspect

John had so much life still to live, but it was taken away from him and Sue lost her loving husband. John's attitude to life was – 'life is too short, just do it, live it to the full.'

A strange, emotional grief reaction, especially if you are younger, can be jealousy; this can be a stumbling block in your journey of grief. You look around and see others with their loved ones, you become angry when you see couples arguing – why, when they at least have one another? You may find it really difficult to see couples holding hands or expressing any affection towards one another. Joining in any kind of social activity may cause you to feel alone or 'the odd one out'. If you can tell people that you find this hard, hopefully they will understand and try to make it easier for you.

Initially after the funeral, Sue was numb and said, 'The grief gets worse not better, as the permanency of John's death sinks in.' It can take a very long

time to move through the journey of grief until you get to a place where you are able to start rebuilding yourself and your life.

## Reflection

John's attitude was to 'live life to the full'.

We are not promised a definite number of days of life here on earth and John and Sue were given a second chance at happiness and took it. Whatever our circumstances, we should appreciate those we have around us and don't put off till tomorrow what can be enjoyed today. The pandemic has demonstrated to us that there are no certainties in life, and in moments our lives can change.

## Prayer

We can take nothing for granted.

*Loving God, you made us and delight in us.  
Give us wisdom and grace to live every day well,  
by following in Jesus' footsteps,  
for that is the way to eternal life.  
Amen*

*If you love until it hurts then there can be no more hurt,  
only more love.*

Mother Teresa of Calcutta

## Arranging the funeral

*It felt like fighting a war, not fought overseas but rather here in our homes and communities.*

I have been a funeral director for almost seven years. We are very aware that the people who come to us are reeling in shock and grief, and we do our very best to support them through the process of arranging the funeral service.

Mrs M died literally just before 'lockdown one'. She was only 66 years old and was a very popular lady in her village. Her husband came to us to organise her funeral in the village church, followed by a cremation. It was going to be a big service with over a hundred people attending.

Two days before the funeral, government restrictions came in limiting the numbers at the service to 30 and we had to break the news to Mr M, who was very upset. He and his sons, one of whom was over from Australia, decided to livestream the service and hired an external company to do this as the church had no facilities for it.

The funeral went ahead with only 30 people present, all socially distanced, but thankfully many others were able to watch the livestreamed service from abroad as well as locally.

One month later, Mr M's mother died. By this time the restrictions on numbers were even tighter and this funeral took place in the crematorium with only six people present.

Not only was Mr M dealing with the loss of his wife and his mother in a short space of time, but he was doing this with virtually none of the 'physical support' that a normal funeral service would provide.

He asked me, 'How can I grieve like this?'

All of us in the company felt very alien with what was going on, adjusting to the changing guidelines, adapting to a new way of facilitating a funeral.

Personally, it felt like fighting a war, perhaps it is our generation's war, not fought overseas but rather here in our homes and communities.

Going forward, we cannot think 'everything has gone back to normal' and I'm conscious when arranging a funeral that at a moment's notice everything could change, and we could be restricted again.

## Reflection

A funeral is an important stepping stone on the pathway of grief. The public ceremony helps us acknowledge the reality of death, honours the life of the deceased and provides support to those who mourn. But what of those whose loved ones had a shortened funeral service with only six of the family allowed to attend? Plans for a memorial service at a later date, when the restrictions are lifted, may not come to pass as time goes on.

There are other ways and things you can do to help reflect, remember, and celebrate their life. The Church of England website suggests the following:

- Call into a church and if available, light a candle, or find a quiet spot outdoors. Or sit in a quiet place at home and light a candle. You might like to have a photograph of the person who has died, or play a piece of music that connects you with them.
- Read Psalm 23.
- Reflect on your memories – what stands out in your memory about the person? What will you always remember about them? What things did you learn through their life and death, including about God?
- Give thanks to God for their life and ask for strength for yourself and those who grieve.

## Prayer

A simple reflection to use at home on the day of a funeral you are unable to attend can be found at: [churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/Funerals%20liturgy%20at%20home%20public.pdf](https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/Funerals%20liturgy%20at%20home%20public.pdf).

*O God, you know the sadness that I and others feel at losing [name], and particularly on this day of their funeral when there is no opportunity to say goodbye.*

*Please be close to all of us who miss them and give us your peace  
and comfort today, and courage and strength to face the days ahead.  
Amen*

# The occupational therapist

*God was absolutely with me in those darkest places.*

Martin was a newly qualified occupational therapist working in a busy hospital. When Covid-19 struck, he was working on the accident and emergency ward, with instructions to get as many people home as possible.

One day he went in to work and the ward had become, overnight, a holding place for patients who had died. Martin had never seen so many dead bodies. He was asked to clean them and ‘bag them up’ – he was not trained for this, nor had he had any previous experience.

With other patients, alive but very ill, Martin was asked to care for them in any way he could. This included talking to their families and using an iPad to help them see their relatives before they died. He remembers one very vividly; the patient was a young woman of 32, a wife and mother, who was very ill and not expected to live more than a few hours. Her husband and young children were distraught and said goodbye to her via the iPad.

Different family members reacted in different ways. Some could not wait to see how their loved ones were, some could not bear it. Others only talked on the phone and some were unable to talk at all.

His best and worst day was when he had to care for so many bodies. It was a very dark time. But at one point, the cleaner came by and was singing ‘Waymaker’ (a Christian song). Martin could not believe his ears; it was as if God had sent an angel! It lifted his spirits and helped him to carry on.

So many people died in that time, most days it was like a war zone, but Martin found that listening to podcasts on his way to work, and to Christian worship music when having to do really difficult tasks alone, helped. He said, ‘God was absolutely with me in those darkest places.’

Outside the hospital, there was a ‘well-being’ van, with a quiet room which staff could use to take some time to recover from situations they were

experiencing. Martin would also use his travelling time home to process what had happened during the day, before going back to his family.

Among the staff, one of the survival tactics was humour. 'In among such tragedy we would have to laugh with one another. This helped to change the whole atmosphere of the ward, and we then regrouped and carried on with our day.' The staff support for each other was quite extraordinary.

Martin said, 'I was working on the intensive care unit, and we became a very close team. We built close relationships with each other very quickly, which I am not sure I will ever experience again.'

## Grief aspect

In grief you will experience a myriad of emotions, a lot of them sad, but sometimes you may experience uncontrollable laughter and joy. Often when families are preparing for the funeral of their loved ones, they will end up looking through family photos and reminiscing. This can bring real joy, laughter and sometimes, hysterics. It may have been years since you have looked at old family holiday snaps or photos of past Christmases together.

Please do not feel guilty in feeling these happy emotions; it is a release of tension and also a healthy way for you to be processing such deep hurt and pain. It is very normal.

Martin experienced trauma, loss, grief, fear and laughter in such difficult circumstances, yet he may find himself and his career the richer for this. In the times of greatest anguish and challenge, we often find the most unexpected blessings because we are not looking for them. How he reacts in situations in the future will be shaped by his experiences during the pandemic, and he will be a strength to others in dark places because of what he has been through. Nothing is wasted.

## Reflection

*There is a time for everything,  
and a season for every activity under the heavens:  
a time to be born and a time to die,  
a time to plant and a time to uproot,*

*a time to kill and a time to heal,  
a time to tear down and a time to build,  
a time to weep and a time to laugh,  
a time to mourn and a time to dance,  
a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,  
a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,  
a time to search and a time to give up,  
a time to keep and a time to throw away,  
a time to tear and a time to mend,  
a time to be silent and a time to speak,  
a time to love and a time to hate,  
a time for war and a time for peace.*

ECCLESIASTES 3:1-8

## Prayer

*Thank you, Jesus, that you are the light of the world; you shine as light in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome you. We pray for those walking in darkness at the moment; please be with them and guide them into a place of safety and peace. Amen*

*Life does not cease to be funny when someone dies any more than it ceases to be serious when someone laughs.*

George Bernard Shaw

## The daughter

*Sam and I have lost both our parents, an aunt and a cousin to Covid-19. I cannot describe the emptiness in our lives; we drag ourselves through each day.*

In January 2020 Helen's aunt, Betty, who lived with Helen's parents, became very unwell. She was a fit and active 75-year-old who loved playing bridge. Betty thought it was just a cold, but then she developed a persistent cough and breathlessness; they called the ambulance when Betty got worse and she was taken into hospital. Helen's dad followed in the car and at that time they were cautious about people visiting, but it was not prevented; he left the hospital at 7.00 pm and then they received a call at 2.00 am to say that Betty had deteriorated rapidly and had died. Aunty Betty was death number one.

Two weeks later Helen's dad was fighting for breath; he had been a smoker and they thought he had a chest infection or pneumonia. He was admitted to hospital in February and after four days he was put on a ventilator to help his breathing. Helen's mum was able to visit him, but the staff were insisting that she wear a gown and mask; he had three days on a ventilator and then passed away. Dad was death number two.

Helen's mum, distraught having lost her sister-in-law and now her husband, had caught a terrible cold. Helen went to stay with her for a few days. 'The house was so empty without Dad and Aunty Betty; Mum could not stop crying. We had arranged Aunty Betty's funeral and then Dad died so we decided to do them together as they were brother and sister. The day before the funeral my mum collapsed; we called the ambulance and she was taken to hospital. I thought it was grief and the weight of all that had happened. I was not allowed to go with her, so I went and waited outside, hoping I could go and sit with her. It was chaos at the hospital, like a war zone, ambulances and people everywhere. Mum died 16 hours after she arrived at the hospital, and I never saw her again.' Mum was death number three.

‘I cancelled the funeral because now we had three to bury. The rules for funeral services then changed, so I ended up having a very small cremation service for my aunt Betty, my mum and my dad. It was the hardest day of my life. April and May went by in a fog. I don’t remember anything of what was happening in the outside world, I just remember wandering around my parents’ house wondering what to do with all the stuff. My cousin Nick, Aunty Betty’s son, called and said he hadn’t been well. Two days later my other cousin called to say Nick had died.’ Nick was death number four.

‘My husband Sam was adopted when he was twelve after his parents died in a car crash. He adored his adoptive parents, Arthur and Jane, who lived in Cambridge, three hours’ drive away. They rang to say they were not feeling well. Sam was in turmoil as to what to do; we were now in lockdown, so unnecessary travel was forbidden. He decided to break the curfew believing this was a necessary journey. He was so glad he did; he was able to spend three days with Arthur and Jane before they died.’ Arthur was death number five, Jane was death number six.

Helen says, ‘Sam and I have lost both sets of parents, an aunt and a cousin to Covid-19. I cannot describe the emptiness in our lives; we drag ourselves through each day.’

## Grief aspect

For Helen, it has been a tsunami of death and she is completely overwhelmed by it. ‘So much loss: it would be so much easier if I also died. I am sure wherever I am going it will be less painful than living.’

Getting through multiple bereavements takes longer and requires more support from community, friends and family as well as possibly needing professional help to acknowledge and adjust to the losses. The pain is unbearable, all-consuming. It can be tempting to try and numb the pain, by being busy, over-working, or use of alcohol or substance misuse. This only delays the grief process and is not helpful.

The time frame for managing daily life after such losses is yours: do not allow anyone to put pressure on you to ‘get up and move on’. You do not want to repeat this time if you can help it, so just take whatever time you

need. This period will not last forever, but it is an important stage of grief to go through.

When you are grieving, there will be days where you just cannot do anything. You cannot get out of bed, have a shower or eat because it is just too difficult. Allow yourself to cry, howl, scream, be silent, alone, smelly and hungry. IT'S OKAY.

When you have so much pain going on in your body, head and heart, you need to conserve all your energy just to keep your body functioning.

## Reflection

The Jewish people have a tradition of *shiva*, which is a period of seven days of mourning starting immediately after the funeral; this is a time when the bereaved person stays indoors and just sits. Meals are provided by family and friends, the person is not expected to wash or dress and visitors come and listen and talk about the loved ones who have died. The period can last for a month, but what is important is the 'time out' for the person to grieve and the support they receive from family, friends and the community.

Whatever religious practice you follow, or none, you need time to grieve, time to allow others to support you and time to reflect.

## Prayer

*Jesus, thank you that when we are overwhelmed with grief and pain, and cannot take another step, you carry us. Help us to rest in you. We ask for your peace to surround us and comfort us. Amen*

## The bridge

*A funeral is like a bridge which those who mourn cross over on the journey of grief.*

When my father died in January 2020, we were not yet into the first lockdown. He had left us precise instructions on how he wanted his funeral to take place, which we had discussed with him, and so it was very easy to organise. Led by one son-in-law who was a clergyman, carried in by his grandsons and the other son-in-law, with his chosen hymns, readings and readers, in the church he had attended since he moved to the area twenty years before. The bell ringers rang him in and tolled him out, his grandsons gave a moving tribute to 'Pa' which had us alternately in fits of laughter and tears, and the church was full of his friends, neighbours, family and the care staff who had looked after him so lovingly for his last two years. My sister gave her tribute acknowledging Dad's health struggles and triumphs over a long life of 96 years. The only time we strayed from his wishes was to finish the service and leave his coffin in its place in church, while we all went into the adjacent hall for a 'good tea'. This enabled everyone to enjoy refreshments and conversation, and for anyone who wished to, to go and have a quiet goodbye with Dad in church. After a suitable time, we gathered to see him carried out of church and our family followed him to the crematorium for a private committal.

Remembering that service has been a great comfort to me in the months since. I often re-read the words of the tributes – it was a service that was uplifting, celebratory and hopeful in equal measure. It has helped me and the rest of the family grieve for him.

Contrast that with the funeral of another family member several months later in lockdown, organised following her wishes. Twelve of us, children and grandchildren only, separated from each other by the seating plan in the chapel. No singing, no tributes, no thankfulness for a life well lived. A short reading, prayers, commendation, committal and then it was over. The thing that 'rescued us' and helped us begin to grieve was enjoying socially distanced coffee and homemade flapjacks in the lovely grounds of

the crematorium in the sunshine, while her two-year-old great-grandson ran around between us.

## Reflection

Death is an ending and it needs a ritual or acknowledgement of that person's life in order to enable the living to grieve and move on. In *New Journeys Now Begin: Learning the path of grief and loss* (Wild Goose Publications, 2006), Tom Gordon says that a funeral is like a bridge which those who mourn cross over on the journey of grief. If the service is a good one, the bridge is strong and firm and helps the healing process. If there was no opportunity for a good goodbye, the bridge is shaky or even missing, and the bereaved may not be able to start that healing process.

This is where an experienced minister can guide and help in offering suggestions to put together a service that reflects the person's life, all underpinned by the Christian hope and promise that death is not the ultimate end. The words – tributes, memories, prayers, commendation and committal – celebrate and remember the person made in God's image loved by God himself and offer comfort and support for those left behind.

## Prayer

*Thank you, Lord, for those who help us after a loved one's death, and particularly for funeral directors and all who take such care to get the service and arrangements right. We pray especially for those who have to say goodbye to their loved ones in times of restriction without the support of family and friends. Amen*

*The other side of loss – having a life that honours your loved one. This will bring you peace.*

## The doctors

*What I now realise is that it's not me who's broken.  
The system is broken.*

### **The following message was written by a doctor and posted on Facebook in desperation:**

57,000 positive Covid cases (in the UK) in one day! And that's just the people who ARE getting tested. Our hospital alone needs 40 more intensive care beds within the next 48 hours to cope with the tsunami of critically unwell patients entering the hospital with Covid. We already have over 100 intensive care patients and hundreds of Covid patients on the wards. It's already too late; the government should have locked down properly months ago, as the public have clearly not taken the warnings seriously and this is why we are in this heart-breaking, exhausting situation now. If the general public continue to disregard the advice healthcare staff are imploring you to heed, then it is on YOUR HEAD that there will not be enough doctors/nurses/hospital beds/ventilators/oxygen for you, your parent, your granny, your husband, wife, daughter, son, neighbour, friend for when they come to hospital, despite our absolute intentions to want to help everyone. We are stretched beyond our limits now and we are told the peak of cases is still a week away. Take a minute to think about that before going to visit that relative or friend of yours today or throwing a house party.

### **An article posted on Facebook by a GP in August 2021:**

From this month, I will no longer be working as a GP within the NHS. In fact, I will no longer be a practising doctor. I've decided, due to the confines of the system, that working in general practice isn't sustainable for me. My decision is discombobulating, disorientating and uncomfortable, the pandemic has definitely played a role in my choice. Life slowed down, but life at work sped up. We worked in new unfamiliar ways, which, while they may

be necessary, have put up barriers between us and our patients. Sadly, the current NHS system doesn't support clinicians to deliver a high standard of compassionate patient-focused care without sacrificing themselves along the way. The workload demands placed on individuals are unsustainable and unreasonable. What I now realise (with great relief because I believed it for a long time) is that it's not me who's broken. The system is broken. I believe the current system is unsustainable and I can only hope for better in the future for my colleagues who continue the good fight. Something needs to change to prevent a mass exodus from the system. Those with power to make change need to act now to protect the most valuable asset the NHS has – its workforce.

## Grief aspect

Anger and injustice are common elements of grief and it is quite normal to experience them. For our healthcare workers, anger may arise from the impossible positions they were put in while dealing with their own exhaustion, fatigue, stress, anxiety and tension while trying to do very difficult, demanding and responsible jobs.

Anger can be directed at so many different people; in the pandemic it has often been the government, senior management, the general public and/or God. Due to such heightened emotions and situations, it is important to acknowledge the anger because persistent anger can be destructive.

Many of our health workers will continue to suffer from the trauma inflicted upon them during the pandemic. Health workers are trained to save lives; it is a vocation not a job. Yet day after day, week after week and month after month they faced decisions of who should get treatment, who should get a ventilator, who had the chance of possibly living or dying today.

## Reflection

Jesus lived his life here on earth loving those who lived lives contrary to what he modelled and taught. He healed the sick, fed the hungry, sat with the dying. He also got angry, especially when people were hard-hearted, didn't listen and oppressed or abused their fellow human beings. On one occasion he turned over the tables of merchants in the temple at Jerusalem

who were selling birds for sacrificial offerings at hugely inflated prices which especially affected poor people coming to worship (Matthew 21:12–13).

## Prayer

*Loving God, we pray for all who are exhausted by the long hours they are working and the decisions they have to make daily. We pray that you will give them renewed strength for each day, and times of relaxation and refreshment to restore them. Amen*

## The mum

*The suicide rates at university are shocking and even though you have become a part of those statistics you still question why and how did this happen?*

Debbie is a mum of four children; it was all she ever wanted to be. She had Scott, then Charlotte came along soon after. Debbie was very happy and then discovered she was expecting twins – four little ones under three! Life was chaotic for years, but the children grew up, went to nursery, then school. Each of the children had their own personalities, and they were all loved.

In 2018 Scott went off to university and settled in really well. The family missed having him around because he was the entertainer and the leader of the pack. In 2019 Charlotte went off to study nursing; she was always the ‘mother figure’, caring and looking after everyone. The house was so quiet and the rest of the family missed the older two very much. The twins could not wait to go away to university, but couldn’t decide whether to go to the same place or different cities.

In 2020 lockdown happened, so Scott and Charlotte moved back home and Debbie’s husband began working from home too. Suddenly life was chaotic again: everyone wanted their space, their access to the internet, their privacy to work, chat, play. Tensions were high and everyone was frayed around the edges.

The twins were still determined to go away to university even in these times of great uncertainty. They had decided to go to separate universities, but it was a very different experience from usual. Due to Covid, the students were confined to their rooms, Fresher’s Week was cancelled and they couldn’t go out to meet and make friends. Matt was in a flat with other lads and they made the best of it, but Molly struggled from the beginning. She was the quietest of all Debbie’s children, but she was a determined young woman. Molly frequently said she wanted to come home; she called her mum most days and pleaded with her to come and get her. Debbie and her husband

were really concerned and discussed what to do at great length with friends who also had teenage children away at university. They all agreed that it was a difficult time for most kids leaving home for the first time, but advised encouraging Molly to stay. Lockdown at that time only allowed essential travel, so Debbie used that as the main reason not to go and pick Molly up, explaining that they did not want to break the rules and the end of term was only a few weeks away. They assured Molly that they would come and pick her up at the end of term. On 26 October Debbie had a phone call from the university to say Molly had been found dead in her room.

The suicide rates at university are shocking and even though you have become a part of those statistics you still question why and how did this happen? The pandemic exacerbated (more than we will probably ever know) the loneliness and isolation for these young people who had left home for the first time. To be confined to one room with no friends or family around, not to be able to go out to get fresh air, was like being in a prison.

## Grief aspect

When you have experienced the loss of a child, you just do not know how you will get through each day; many parents experience feelings of suicide themselves because of the deep pain they are suffering. The combination of shock, trauma and grief creates utter turmoil with a range of emotions – shock, disbelief, numbness, distraction, sorrow, despair, rejection, abandonment, failure, guilt, regret, shame, anger, rage, hatred, anxiety, fear, paralysis, sleeplessness, relief and self-destructive thoughts and feelings. Many of these emotions will not last a long time, but it is possible you may experience them all at one stage or another on your grief journey. The grief of suicide will stay with you forever.

‘Why did it happen?’ is a significant part of this grief journey. We want answers or an explanation; this is often in search of comfort. You may go over and over again in detail the things that happened, punishing yourself with regrets. ‘If only I had...’, ‘what if...’, ‘it’s my fault...’, ‘what were they thinking?’

This is all normal and understandable because we can never make sense of losing someone to suicide, especially if they are fit and healthy teenagers. The grief you will be experiencing will change you and your life for ever.

If you have experienced this kind of loss, we want to encourage you to seek specialist help, to talk to experienced people to help you through this traumatic event. There are many organisations who can support you and your family through the hardest of days. Please see the resources page for more information.

## Reflection

God promises to be close to the broken-hearted; he knows what we are going through. Psalm 56 says:

*You keep track of all my sorrows.  
You have collected all my tears in your bottle.  
You have recorded each one in your book.*

PSALM 56:8 (NLT)

On your journey of grief, there will come a day when there will be no more tears, when you notice that the sun is shining, and you begin to feel that life might be worth living again.

Hold on to the promise of God that he will be with you in the darkest times, as Psalm 23 tells us:

*Even when I walk  
through the darkest valley,  
I will not be afraid,  
for you are close beside me.  
Your rod and your staff  
protect and comfort me.*

PSALM 23:4 (NLT)

## Prayer

*God of all mercy and comfort, you know how it hurts to lose a child.  
Please be close to those who grieve for a son or daughter and support  
them in their pain. Amen*

## The outsider

*What do I do now? I am lost, a foreigner in the UK.*

We came to the UK 13 years ago because we could not find any work in Romania and we wanted to give our unborn child the hope of a new life. In the next seven years we both got our UK passports, our two children were born and we both found jobs working in the care home sector.

Early in 2020, in both of the care homes that we worked in, we had residents who were dying and at first we did not realise why, but then discovered that they had Covid-19.

Everything changed; the care homes where we worked went from being lovely, friendly, fun, family atmospheres to being like a prison. Our residents had to stay in their rooms, and there was an immediate stop to all activities and social groups. Our lounges were empty and the dining room was never used.

Many of the care team became unwell during the next weeks and months, so we were asked to do extra shifts. We also had our two children to look after and had to teach them at home. It was such a difficult time; we lost so many of our dear residents who were like family. Work was difficult and exhausting, it took ages changing all our PPE for each resident and each task. We ran out of PPE many times and had to find our own in order to protect ourselves.

We were hugely relieved to get through 2020 and most of 2021 and our children were so excited when they could go back to school.

In September 2021 my husband came home with a really bad cold, so I sent him to bed to rest. In the middle of the night he could not get his breath and an ambulance crew took him to hospital. I could not go with him because there was no one to look after the children. I called the hospital in the morning to see how he was, only to find out that he was in a coma. The nurse told me that he was very poorly and invited me in to sit with him. I arranged

childcare and went into the hospital at 10.25 am; my husband was on a machine helping him to breathe, but he was not awake. I held his hand and talked to him, and he did squeeze my hand at one point. The doctor came and spoke to me and said, 'I am really sorry, but your husband may not pull through, you can stay as long as you need to.' At 3.10 pm my precious husband died. He was 37 years old.

We had lived through the worst and cared for so many people who had died, yet just when we thought we were safe and through it, I lost the love of my life.

What do I do now? I am lost, a foreigner in the UK. I have sent my husband's body home to Romania to be buried and had a small service here with eight people who knew him. But what now?

## Grief aspect

Corianne, having lost her husband with whom she has shared her life and worked so hard, is suddenly plunged into the dark hole of loneliness, in a foreign land without the support of her wider family. She is now having to face the hardest questions and situations in life alone; questions about a funeral, money, the future.

If you are in a similar situation, you will know that you do not have the answers. All sorts of situations arise – birthdays, celebrations, maintenance issues in the home, changing the car, a holiday – so many situations that would have been faced together, now have to be decided alone.

During this period of time you may feel that you want to make big changes – move house, go on a holiday, sell everything and start again, embark on a new relationship. This is not uncommon and often will come from a place of wanting to numb or dull the pain of loss.

It is generally advised not to make any big decisions when you are in the early stages of grief. Allow time to be the decider. Talk your decisions through with family and friends to get their views, but please do not do anything in haste. In grief you can be emotionally, physically, psychologically, spiritually and cognitively weak, so decisions made while grieving may be regretted later.

You are vulnerable and it can be a time when you can be taken advantage of, fall prey to scams, or be encouraged to do things you would not normally do.

## Reflection

In the Bible, the book of Ruth tells the story of Naomi and her husband and sons who moved to a different country to find food and work. Initially life was good, but then Ruth's husband and both her sons died. She decided to go back home and one daughter-in-law, Ruth, faithfully stayed with her, helping and supporting her.

Take time to reflect on the people in your life who you know will be alongside you. Ask God to bless those relationships and protect them.

## Prayer

*Heavenly Father, we pray for all who have no one to turn to in their sorrow and distress, especially those who are not living in their home country. We pray that you will bring alongside them people who will love, care for and befriend them. Amen*

*In community our fears and anger are transformed by God's unconditional love, in community God's compassion becomes present in the midst of a broken world.*

Henri Nouwen

## Peace and acceptance

*All things must come to an end, but love is eternal.*

When I don't want something to end, I often recall Peter the disciple on the Mount of Transfiguration who wanted to make three dwellings for the dazzling Jesus before him, with Moses and Elijah. He wanted to capture the moment, it seems, so they would be together always.

Life brings us many moments or seasons we never want to end and people we never want to leave us, but endings and partings are an inevitable part of life. Earlier in the summer, our family gathered for my sister's youngest son's wedding. This was the third date, a year after Covid lockdown and 18 months after the deaths of our beloved dad, 'Pa', and my brother-in-law's mother, 'Grannie'. The marriage service was in a pretty little church, which I had the joy of taking, and the reception was held in the same venue where my eldest nephew and his wife had married ten years earlier. Then, both Pa and Grannie had been younger, well and able to join in the celebrations. We were all aware of the spaces that they left. How they would have loved to be present!

Yet they were. Without consulting, a number of us had brought something of significance with us. I had a photo of Mum and Dad on the front of my service book, the groom was wearing the cufflinks given to Pa by our mum on their wedding day 60 years earlier and had one of my dad's old diaries slipped into his jacket pocket. Grannie's daughter was wearing her mum's ring. My sister was wearing Pa's old watch and her eldest son Pa's fake Rolex!

At the reception we laughed (and cried!) as we discovered the collection of little treasures we each carried and marvelled at how in their different ways they connected us to our much loved and missed older family.

### Reflection

Grief is like an unwelcome stranger and something we'd like to shut out. Yet, if we face grief, acknowledge it and notice what it has to teach us, then

we may find we can savour the life we once shared and find new ways to remember our loved ones. All things must come to an end, but love is eternal.

Perhaps this poem will resonate with you as it did with me.

***Into the hour***

*I have come into the hour of a white healing.  
Grief's surgery is over and I wear  
The scar of my remorse and of my feeling.*

*I have come into a sudden sunlit hour  
When ghosts are scared to corners. I have come  
into the time when grief begins to flower*

*Into a new love. It had filled my room  
Long before I recognised it. Now  
I speak its name. Grief finds its good way home.*

*The apple-blossom's handsome on the bough  
And paradise spreads round. I touch its grass.  
I want to celebrate but don't know how.*

*I need not speak, though everyone I pass  
Stares at me kindly. I would put my hand  
Into their hands. Now I have lost my loss*

*In some way I may later understand.  
I hear the singing of the summer grass.  
And love, I find, has no considered end,*

*Nor is it subject to the wilderness  
Which follows death. I am not a traitor to  
A person or a memory. I trace*

*Behind that love another which is running  
Around, ahead. I need not ask its meaning.*

## Prayer

*Thank you, God, for walking with us through the dark wilderness of grief and sadness and bringing us into the sunshine of healing. Amen*

*A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.*

Lao Tzu

# Guidelines for listeners

## Preparation of venue

Ensure the place where you are meeting is easily accessible and on a bus route or with parking facilities nearby. It should be warm, welcoming and comfortable. Place the chairs where you are sitting in a position so that you can face the person and be able to have eye contact. Make sure you will be able to hear one another well.

Have a box of tissues near at hand and a glass of water.

## Preparation of yourself

Put the things going on in your own life out of your mind, turn your phone off, put aside paper, iPad, pen and relax. Be aware of your body language – avoid crossed arms or legs, be sure to show you are engaged and listening.

## Stop, look, listen

Stop talking. Look at their body language and posture (non-verbal language) and listen to their tone of voice. Let them talk, do not interrupt or talk over them. Let them finish what they are saying even if there are emotional pauses.

## Pay attention

Focus on what is being said. If necessary, when they have finished talking, repeat back to them what you have heard. Nod your head, smile and encourage them to continue talking.

## Be non-judgemental

Do not give your personal opinion or comment on their feelings. Keep an open mind and respect their views and opinions.

## **Patience**

Silence and long pauses may be necessary for a person to think and process what they want to say. Give them the time and space to do so without interrupting their thinking time.

## **Hold back**

Don't rush to give your answers or response; often giving someone the opportunity to talk enables them to come to their own solutions.

## **Reflection**

Ask questions to show you have listened and heard correctly, then ask open questions – how did that make you feel? What happened next?

## **Response**

Sum up what you believe they have shared with you. Respond in the singular i.e. speak from your heart – do not use phrases like 'everyone says', or 'we all'.

## **Remember**

Reassure the person that all that is shared is confidential, unless it is a safeguarding issue.

# Dos and don'ts with people who are grieving

For those of us who are around people who are going through loss, grief and heartache, here are a few dos and don'ts:

## Do

- Do leave a simple meal that can be eaten or put in the fridge
- Do leave a note with your number saying 'call if you want me to listen'
- Do listen
- Do, when you have listened, listen more
- Do listen more again: let them talk about their loved one whenever and however much they want to
- Do be tender – your friend is in terrible pain
- Do give a hug (if appropriate)
- Do share your favourite memory of their loved one

## Don't

- Don't try to give answers
- Don't tell them what they should be doing or feeling
- Don't expect them to help you in your grief
- Don't say you understand what they are going through because you don't – grief is unique
- Don't avoid them
- Don't try to fix the loss
- Don't put a time limit on grieving
- Don't expect them to make any decisions about what you can do

## Do say

- I am so sorry to hear about your loss
- I don't know what to say
- I don't know how you feel, but I am here

- You and your loved ones will be in my thoughts and prayers
- My favourite memory of your loved one
- I am just a call away
- We all need help at times like this, so please let me help you
- I am usually up early or late, you can call me
- Nothing and just be there with them

## **Don't say**

- At least she lived a long life, many people die young
- He is in a better place
- She brought this on herself
- There is a reason for everything
- Are you not over him yet? He has been dead for a while now
- You can have another child still
- She was such a good person God wanted her to be with him
- I know how you feel
- She did what she came here to do and it was her time to go
- Be strong

# Resources

## Books

- Malcolm Duncan, *Good Grief: Living with sorrow and loss* (Lion Hudson Limited, 2020).
- Tom Gordon, *New Journeys Now Begin: Learning on the path of loss and grief* (Wild Goose Publications, 2006).
- Albert Y. Hsu, *Grieving a Suicide: A loved one's search for comfort, answers and hope*, second edition (IVP, 2017).
- Jerusha Hull McCormack, *Grieving: A beginner's guide* (Darton Longman and Todd, 2005).
- David Kessler, *Finding Meaning: The sixth stage of grief* (Penguin Random House/Ebury Publishing, 2019).
- Kathryn Mannix, *With the End in Mind: How to live and die well* (William Collins, 2017).
- Kristin Meekhof and James Windell, *A Widow's Guide to Healing: Gentle support and advice for the first five years* (Sourcebooks, 2015).
- Janet Morley, *Our Last Awakening: Poems for living in the face of death* (SPCK, 2016).
- Jerry Sittser, *A Grace Disguised: How the soul grows through loss*, revised and expanded edition (Zondervan, 2021).

## Websites

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <a href="http://ataloss.org">ataloss.org</a>                                   | <a href="http://uk-sobs.org.uk">uk-sobs.org.uk</a>         |
| <a href="http://churchofengland.org/funerals">churchofengland.org/funerals</a> | <a href="http://tcf.org.uk">tcf.org.uk</a>                 |
| <a href="http://nhs.uk">nhs.uk</a>   | <a href="http://ifucareshare.co.uk">ifucareshare.co.uk</a> |
| <a href="http://mind.org.uk">mind.org.uk</a>                                   | <a href="http://samaritans.org">samaritans.org</a>         |
| <a href="http://cruse.org.uk">cruse.org.uk</a>                                 | <a href="http://allianceofhope.org">allianceofhope.org</a> |
| <a href="http://winstonswish.org">winstonswish.org</a>                         |  |



*Enabling all ages to grow in faith*



Anna Chaplaincy  
**Living Faith**  
Messy Church  
**Parenting for Faith**

## 100 years of BRF

2022 is BRF's 100th anniversary! Look out for details of our special new centenary resources, a beautiful centenary rose and an online thanksgiving service that we hope you'll attend. This centenary year we're focusing on sharing the story of BRF, the story of the Bible – and we hope you'll share your stories of faith with us too.

Find out more at [brf.org.uk/centenary](https://brf.org.uk/centenary).



To find out more about our work, visit  
**[brf.org.uk](https://brf.org.uk)**

This booklet records true stories of people's personal experiences during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. Individuals, key workers and those offering pastoral support all share their stories of trauma, grief and moral injury.

It is written

- in recognition of all those who have experienced loss, heartbreak and isolation in circumstances completely out of their control;
- in thanks to all those working in public services who have gone above and beyond the call of duty to care for and protect us, and who continue to do so;
- in support of all those who now live with grief, an empty chair at the table, an ache in their heart and a sorrow that will not go away.

It tells the stories that need to be heard and provides practical suggestions based on biblical principles on how to cope with grief, challenging the stigma and fear and recognising the impact of grieving on a whole-community and national scale.

**Gail Millar** is an Anna Chaplain, a grief counsellor and founder of the Christian charity Befriended, whose vision is to end loneliness and isolation amongst older people living in mid-Sussex. Formerly an NHS physiotherapist working with older people, **Jill Phipps** has been an older person's chaplain in Portsmouth, is a member of the Anna Chaplaincy network and helped to pilot Messy Vintage in the UK.

*'Our prayers and thoughts remain with all those who have entrusted us with their story but also the thousands of others who have not had the opportunity yet to share their story and are stuck in their grief journey. We pray that this little booklet will get into the hands of the right people and that it will be just what they need to bring them hope, comfort and a sense of connection.'*

**Gail Millar**



[brf.org.uk](http://brf.org.uk)