my GRIEF HANDBOOK

WHY GRIEF HURTS AND HOW TO COPE

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Content Warning: This book contains references to suicide.

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PREFACE

We're sorry you're having to read this book, because it probably means someone important in your life has died. Whenever and however that happened, it will most likely be tough and will hurt. We hope this book can be some kind of navigation tool to help you find your way in your grief. When we say a 'navigation tool', we need to explain that this is no Google maps with a fast-route and a short-route option. But we hope to help you make sense of the landscape you are experiencing and give you some ideas that help you cope with whatever direction your grief is taking you.

If you're an adult of a bereaved teenager reading this book to help you understand more about grief, then good on you. If you're the friend of a teenager who is grieving, then that's great that you're being such a good friend and wanting to understand a bit more about what your friend is going through and how you can support them.

How can this book help?

Lots of people talk about needing to 'process' grief. Even though we sometimes use this word, we still wonder what it actually means! We hope that spending time thinking through and making sense of what hurts and why and then finding your ways to cope are all tasks that can help with 'processing'.

There's no wrong way to do grief, and there's no one-size-fits-all solution in terms of support. Sometimes the reactions of adults and others around you can make you feel that you are 'doing your grief wrong'. They might suggest you need to see an expert such as a counsellor or therapist. That might be really helpful if your grief is extra heavy, and you feel you need help to manage it. But there is no automatic need for specialist psychological help. And with support from home, friends and school, many young people find a way to do their grief and adjust to life. Many bereaved teenagers also find it helpful to connect with others who are bereaved within a group or have some 1:1 time to talk to someone.

This book will give you some ideas to help you work out how you are getting on and whether any of our suggestions make a difference to how you are coping. You can then talk it through with an adult you trust, to help you work out whether you could do with some more help. There are some ideas for when and where to get more help in Chapter 3.

As well as giving you our ideas from working with and learning from many, many bereaved young people, Olivia, our amazing young-person co-author has been working to

help keep us in check. Olivia's dad died when she was a teenager. As our expert by experience, Olivia has helped make sure that we are speaking about young people's experiences of grief in a way that seems accurate and respectful. And she has added some personal experiences of her own, too.

We have also included some characters to help explain and give examples of what we mean. None of these characters are real individuals, but their stories have been created using a mixture of the stories of young people we have supported.

OLIVIA'S PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Grief is very lonely at times, and sometimes being a teenager sucks, too! You're learning how to grow up and navigating such a confusing world of emotions and physical changes that it's easy to get overwhelmed without realizing. This overwhelming feeling can be scary and make you think you can't talk to people. But find people you trust and tell them how you're feeling.

Your emotions can feel so scrambled that your judgement may not be as good as you think, and if you're worried that you might do something silly and dangerous, tell someone you trust. Grief is weird, and it can make us want to do things we might not have wanted to do before, because our minds are looking for outlets for our thoughts and emotions, but trust your gut; if you don't like how you're feeling, or you don't understand some of your emotions/thoughts/decisions, reach out to someone you

trust. Try new ways to cope with your grief, but keeping yourself safe is so important, and it can be easy to overlook and lose sight of that.

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Chapter 1

WHY BEREAVEMENT IS SO HARD

Grief is the price we pay for love

What probably makes bereavement so tough is experiencing the permanent loss of someone important, and still having to somehow get on with everything that everyone expects you to be doing at this time in your life. The phrase 'grief is the price we pay for love'[1] goes some way towards helping to explain this. Because the person who died was significant to you, and you had an important relationship with them, it is probably going to hurt a lot when they are no longer there.

Psychologists describe strong relationships as attachments. These are the bonds of warmth, love and security that we have with key people – often our family or close friends. In spite of daily ups and downs, these relationships are seen to be the foundation of wellbeing and good development.

1 Parkes, C.M. (1972) *Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life.* London: Tavistock.

So it's inevitable that it's going to hurt a lot when that person is gone and you can no longer have them physically in your life.

While attachment may mean the pain you feel at their death is at times overwhelming, it is this same foundation of love that gives you something powerful to hold on to, knowing how special that person was to you and you were to them.

But grief is individual, and the depth of your grief is not related to how much you loved the person or how good your relationship was. Sometimes even though you loved the person who has died very much, your pain can feel more manageable, and you may have all sorts of reasons for not finding grief so very hard. Sometimes, the relationship you had with the person who died was complicated, or perhaps they were already absent in your life, and yet you find that after their death, it is a real (and understandable) struggle to manage your grief (more about this in Chapter 2). Sometimes we grieve for the love we *should* have had and maybe one day hoped to have, and that can really, really hurt.

[AQ]When you have had strong attachments or secure relationships as you have been growing up, even though the grief feels very painful and at times overwhelming, it gives you a strong foundation that can help you to get through each day. It's as though these relationships give us strong roots to help us weather the storm of the grief and the tornado of feelings it can bring. Grief can blow us around a lot and leave us feeling pretty *battered*, but somehow our roots keep us secure. Those roots that are going to support you might be based on strong relationships you've had in the

past that have given you a certain sense of feeling secure which will now help you weather the storm.



But your roots might also be formed of ongoing current relationships (with friends, family and furry friends) and the support that they can give you. The roots may even be based on an ongoing connection with the person that has died – even if that seems weird. But lots of people continue to have

a relationship of some sort with someone who has died. Of course, it's a different relationship to the one they had when the person was alive, but it's still a relationship – the person who died can continue to play a part in your life.



You may not have had so many strong relationships in your growing-up years, so when someone dies, that brings even more challenges and another hard thing to manage on top of the pain you may have been through. On the other hand, often this gives you lots of experience in being blown around by the storms of life. And you might be able to use what you have learned from these other storms to help you get through each day with your grief. Maybe the friendships and relationships in your life right now are not really the most steady or helpful and that makes coping a bit harder. But this

book is full of ideas to help you cope, and they don't all rely on someone else.

You are probably finding out about the price of your grief with the many different ways the death of someone important has affected you. Young people we have worked with have told us about the different ways their grief costs them: the physical cost, the emotional cost, the thinking cost and the practical cost.

Physical: the way your grief is affecting your body

Feelings are not just in your mind – they affect your body, too. You may be feeling a lot more tired, and yet, unhelpfully, less able to sleep deeply. You may feel like your body still feels a bit shocked by the news – this can come back to you even some time after the first shock has passed. After an earthquake, there can still be really big 'aftershocks' for quite a while after. Even when your mind is busy with something else, you can feel as if your body is still carrying around a big weight of grief right inside your chest, a kind of heaviness in your heart. You might feel generally unwell or have specific aches and pains associated with the deep pain of your grief. If you are worried about the way your body is feeling, tell an adult and get your GP to check.

> "I just don't have the energy for anything, I'm so tired. (Tara)

> "Even though I had a good time with my friends tonight, my chest just feels so heavy. (Kareem)

> "I keep getting a stomach ache; it's probably nothing, but I don't feel hungry anymore. (Jared)

Emotional: the way your grief is affecting how you feel.

There is no official list of feelings that go with grief – what you're feeling is what you're feeling! You might have all sorts of shocked, sad, angry, worried, lonely feelings. You might also have some comforting ones about feeling loved, happy, peaceful or relieved. It's your grief – and you won't find us telling you that you're feeling the 'wrong' thing!

Each feeling that you have may differ in how big or strong it feels. One day your cross feelings can feel small enough to manage, but the next day they feel big and get in the way of everything. And then the next day they aren't there at all. You may experience any number of feelings in any one day – you might find that your feelings change rapidly, catch you out when you aren't expecting them, or you might find that you feel stuck feeling the same way for a long time. Perhaps you find that you are holding on to opposite feelings at the same time – this can be hard to get your head around, and it doesn't seem to make sense.

> "I'm really sad that Dad isn't here to watch this movie with me. And I even miss him trying to take handfuls of my popcorn. But when I watch it, I also get some comfort and happiness from the memory of laughing with Dad when we saw it before. (Tara)

Thinking: the way your grief affects how and what you think.

Lots of young people tell us that concentrating on things is really hard when someone has died, especially at first. Keeping your attention on one thing can be difficult – sometimes because thoughts about the person that died