

## Now life is no longer the same

By Ruth Ostrow

AS promised last week, I'd like to air a few more responses to the column I wrote on grief, because so many readers expressed deep gratitude at being given permission to keep grieving.

As one woman in her 40s, Helena, who lost her husband to cancer seven years ago, wrote:

"You just can't put a time on your grief. It takes as long as it takes. Studies have found that the grief is related to so many variables. Was it sudden, was it expected, what was the relationship, were you there? How you cope is different for everyone."

A male reader who asked to remain anonymous wrote of losing his child to an unexpected brain aneurism.

"I read your article on grieving. As I lay in bed I had tears in my eyes because your words were so true. My eldest daughter died in March 1998, two weeks before her 10th birthday. She was a lively girl, who loved music, dolphins, dancing.

"There is no life training for grief. We grow up expecting to love, to have broken relationships, get a job, lose a job, move house, all that sort of stuff. Yet nothing prepared me for this constant blackness. People are helpless, they want to get on with their lives and not to think about our sadness.

"Picture this. Our second Christmas without 'H', my wife meets a lady coming out of the bakery who says: 'What a wonderful Christmas, did you have a good one?' That same lady knew about our child's death as she had children at the same school.

"With grief, it is not that I want people to understand what I'm going through. Rather just to acknowledge that for us life is no longer the same."

One reader, Chris, who lost her 17-year-old son, wrote of bumping into one of her son's best friends. "[He] introduced me to his girlfriend. The sense of loss deepened. The 'what ifs' of wondering what Ben would look like and be like now, began. We would have celebrated his 20th birthday this week.

"At work, I maintain my professional persona, and when friends and colleagues stop to chat we generally stick to safe topics like work. So I keep stumbling on. I laugh and love, but I grieve daily. Painful losses are like very deep wounds: healing occurs very slowly, and the scar remains very sensitive."

A man wrote: "Just a note to say thank you. My wife died in March '98 and I was wondering why I was still grieving. We were married for 36 years."

Alina Holgate, a psychologist and lecturer at Deakin University, tells a touching story of a woman she met who had lost her 14-year-old son a decade before but had never talked about her pain. Finally, after a lot of prompting, the woman

opened up and admitted feeling guilty. She said: "I know I shouldn't feel this way after so long."

Holgate wrote: "And she cried. Boy, did she cry -- she sobbed great gulping sobs like she'd never cried so much in her life. It was really like a dam had broken and that she was crying years of suppressed tears. I thought what a waste it was that her grief had eaten at her for 10 years and that a simple bit of acknowledgment of her feelings from me was all it took to bring this all to the surface.

"The fact is that grief lasts a long, long time, and is made much worse by the apparent tendency of everyone around the grieving person to deny their pain.

"It's not that hard to bring a little relief to a grieving person by simply letting them talk and being honest in your own reactions. Why, when someone dies, do people behave as if the person had never lived? Why are we so uncomfortable just sitting with someone who is crying?"

Twenty-year-old law student, Fiona, wrote of losing too many loved ones in her short life. She hoped people would move beyond the shame of grief and finally accept it as a deep expression of their humanity.

After weeping through my readers' emails, this one made me smile.

"Dear Ruth, I am an elderly Dutchwoman living in Australia. When I was young my mother once said to me: 'It is comforting to live with the dead.' I never knew exactly what she meant until now, when I am almost 80.

"Like all other emotions, grief has to run its course. There are no shortcuts. But there comes a moment when the almost-physical pain subsides; when we grow to accept that the people we love often have to leave us, sometimes too early and in a very difficult way. Only then will they become part of our cherished memories, and can we visit them in peace."

[www.ruthostrow.com](http://www.ruthostrow.com)

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