

WHEN SOMEONE DIES



*A workbook for grief
that has a name but no map.*

—
For anyone who has lost someone —
and is finding that grief looks
nothing like they expected.



Shelagh MacFarlane

MSc Counselling Psychology (UK)

BCPA Registered (Canada),

20+ years in private practice

A note from me to you

The grief of losing someone

If you have picked up this workbook, someone you love has died.

And you may be finding that grief looks nothing like you expected it to.

I will begin with something I find myself saying often, in the early weeks and months after a significant loss, something I wish someone had said to me earlier in my own life.

Grief is not a problem to be solved.

It is not a process to be managed correctly. It is not something you can do well or badly, quickly or slowly, in the right way or the wrong way.

It is simply the price of love.

And it asks of you not efficiency or fortitude, but patience, honesty, and a quality of attention towards yourself that most of us were never taught.

That last one is the ground the rest of this book stands on, and it has a name. Self-compassion. Kristin Neff, who has spent her working life studying it, describes it as three things held together.

Self-kindness, which means meeting yourself the way you would meet someone you love who was in this much pain, rather than the way you have probably been meeting yourself. Common humanity, which means remembering that what you are going through is not a private failing but something human beings have always gone through, and grief is very good at convincing us otherwise. And mindfulness, which means being willing to look at what is here, without minimising it and without being swallowed by it.

You will find these three running through everything that follows. Not as an exercise to complete, but as the way I hope you will treat yourself while you do this work.

You may have picked up this workbook in the acute rawness of a recent loss.

Or you may have picked it up months or years later, sensing that something has not moved in the way you hoped, that grief is still present in ways you did not expect, that there are things you have not yet found words for.

Both are entirely appropriate moments to be here.

Over more than twenty years of sitting alongside grief, I have been struck, over and over, by the same thing. How alone this can feel.

Not because there is no one around you. Many of us who are grieving are surrounded by those who love us. It is that grief happens so far inside, and the landscape in there is very hard to put into words.

Those around you want to help, and often do not know how.

And you, perhaps, do not yet know how to explain what you need, partly because you may not yet fully know yourself.

I have also noticed how little of what we were taught about grief prepares us for the real thing.

The idea that grief comes in stages. The expectation of linear progress. The sense that a year is roughly how long it should take. The pressure to be grateful for the time you had.

All of it can make the actual, non-linear, ambushing, physically felt experience of grief seem like a personal failure, rather than what it actually is, a completely human response to an enormous loss.

I have lived alongside grief in my own life.

My grandparents at an early age, my father in my twenties, and, most profoundly, my mother. Ours was a loving relationship, and at times a difficult one, as close relationships often are. Part of what bound us so closely was that we were also each other's only family, she was an only child, and so am I. Even though she lived in Canada and I lived in Malaysia, we made a point of spending time together during the summer, and in the last seven months of her life, she came to live with me in Malaysia. Of all my losses, hers is the one that taught me the most about what grief is.

When she died, I felt a loss so large that at first I could not fully take it in.

There was a period of numbness. I wanted to cry, but the tears did not come. It was not that I did not feel anything, it was more that part of me could not yet allow the full reality of what had happened to land. The finality of it was too vast to grasp all at once.

There was regret and guilt, all the ways I imagined I could have been a better daughter along with the frightening sense of being completely alone in the world. There were moments that felt almost unreal, as though my mind could not fully reconcile that she had existed and was now gone, as though the truth arrived in fragments, rather than all at once.

Looking back, I have come to understand that this was not a failure of acceptance, it was grief doing what grief often does, pacing the truth so it could be metabolised slowly.

At times I wanted to push through it, to get to the other side of it. But over time I began to understand something I have seen since, again and again, far beyond my own life.

Grief has a wisdom of its own.

Sometimes it protects us when what has happened is simply too much to hold at once.

It does not ask us to be strong. It does not demand that we move on. It unfolds in its own time.

And slowly, often far more slowly than we would like, it begins to shift us towards a different relationship with what has been lost. Not forgetting, not letting go, but an eventual, painful recognition of what is.

I do not believe we heal by leaving our loved ones behind.

I believe we heal by finding a way to carry that love with us, while continuing to live.

I have also learned that grief is rarely simple.

It holds love and anger, gratitude and regret, closeness and distance, sometimes all at once. It holds what was said, and what was never said. It holds the relationships that were full and clear, and those that were unfinished or complicated.

This workbook is a place for all of it.

It will not tell you how to grieve.

What it offers instead is a more accurate map of what grief tends to be, what it does to the body and mind, what it often needs, and what you might find helpful along the way. Not as rules, but as possibilities.

There will be questions that are difficult to sit with, and space for things that may not yet have been said.

Whatever form your loss has taken, and whatever form your grief is taking, it is real.

It is valid.

And it deserves care.

With warmth,

Shelagh MacFarlane, MSc Counselling Psychology

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

How to use this workbook

This is a structured workbook with writing space throughout. You can print it and complete it by hand, or use it as a framework for journalling. Work through the sections in order if you are able to, they are designed to build on each other, but trust your own instincts if you are drawn immediately to a particular section.

One thing holds for every exercise in this book, so I will say it here once rather than repeat it on every page. There are no right answers. Nothing has to be finished in one sitting. Stay with what feels useful, leave what doesn't, and be as gentle with yourself as you would be with someone you love.

A note before you begin. Grief does not always arrive in a form that feels safe to look at directly.

If certain sections feel like too much for now, set those aside and return when you are ready. There is no right pace for this work, and no section you are required to complete before you are ready.

And if at any point what comes up feels too large to hold alone, please go directly to the final section, which maps the support available to you, and consider reaching out, rather than sitting with it in isolation.

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SECTION 1

What grief after death involves

And why it bears so little resemblance to what we expected

Of all the losses this series covers, grief after death is the one our culture has the most language for. The most rituals, the most rules. And, I've come to believe, some of the least accurate ideas about what it involves.

There's a well-known model of grief made up of five stages, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. Whether or not you've come across it before, it's worth knowing about, because it has shaped how most of us think about grief, often without us realising it. I'm raising it early, because it's so easy to end up quietly measuring yourself against it. Wondering whether you're doing this in the right order. Whether you're taking too long. Whether you're angry enough, or angry for far too long.

One thing I would gently offer you here. The stages were never meant to be a map you have to follow.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross developed the stages from watching those who were themselves dying, not from any study of grief after a death, and she said clearly, more than once, that she never meant them as a fixed sequence. Somewhere along the way, that got lost.

What decades of research since have shown is more complicated than the five stages. And, I think, far more reassuring.

Grief isn't linear.

It isn't uniform.

It doesn't have a fixed duration.

And it doesn't end with a stage called acceptance that closes like a door.

Grief is a reorganisation

If I had to put it in one sentence, I'd say this. Grief is you, slowly rebuilding a world that no longer has this person in it.

When someone who's been central to your life is gone, the world doesn't simply contain an absence. It reorganises itself around that absence, and it touches everything. The shape of your days. The future you'd imagined. Who you were in that relationship. The things you'll now never be able to say, or do, or repair.

You'll be adjusting to this, not once, but again and again, as new parts of the loss show themselves over time.

And it isn't a straight line.

It circles back. It surfaces when you least expect it. It won't always match up with how much time has passed.

You might seem to be doing well in the weeks after a death, and then find yourself undone a year later, when the anaesthetic of shock and activity has worn off. Or you might feel it acutely early on, move through it faster than you expected, and then feel guilty about that.

Neither of these is wrong. Both are grief, doing what grief does.

And if you have caught yourself checking, measuring where you are against where you think you should be by now, that is worth noticing rather than adding to the list of things to feel bad about. Almost all of us do it. It is what happens when you have been handed a model and told it was a map.

Grief is physical

Grief lives in the body every bit as much as it lives in the mind.

The broken sleep, the exhaustion, the heaviness in your chest, the way the smallest task now costs more than it should. These aren't side effects of grief.

They are grief.

The brain handles loss along some of the same pathways it uses for physical pain. Which is why heartbreak isn't a metaphor. It's a description.

Grief is social, and often inadequately so

Grief also needs to be witnessed, even though so much of it happens when nobody else is looking. The rituals around death exist because communities have understood this for a very long time.

But rituals end. And what they can't give you is the sustained witness grief needs, not for weeks, but for months and years.

You may find that the support that surrounded you at first quietly withdraws after a few weeks. Which is often the exact moment the shock starts to lift, and the real work of grief begins.

Exercise 1 What has surprised you about your grief

Looking back - *Over the days, weeks, or months since your loss, what has surprised you most about your own grief?*

What has it looked like that you did not expect? What has been harder than you anticipated, or simply different from how you imagined it would be?

Exercise 2 The loss within the loss

More than one loss - *When someone dies, we grieve not only the person but everything that presence contained, the future that is now changed, the relationship that cannot develop further, the things that will now go unsaid, the role now vacant.*

What specifically have you lost, alongside the person themselves?

Try to name as many dimensions of the loss as you can, the concrete and the less tangible.

SECTION 2

The body in grief

Why physical symptoms are not a sign that something is wrong

Almost nobody warns you how physical grief is.

Your mind knows the person you love has died. It knows it the way it knows a fact. But your body doesn't know yet. Your body was organised for years around that presence, that voice, that particular way of moving through a room, and it takes far longer to take in that the presence has gone.

That gap, between what you know and what your body still expects, is a great deal of why early grief feels so disorienting.

What grief does in the body

You may already recognise some of this, even if nobody has ever named it for you.

Sleep that won't come, or won't let you go. Lying awake. Waking at three. Sleeping far more than you ever used to.

A tiredness that rest doesn't touch. A heaviness in your chest that, on the hardest days, feels like something is actually pressing down on you.

A mind that won't hold a thought, sometimes called grief fog. A rawness to everything, as though someone has turned your senses up. Cold hands. Heavy limbs. The sense of not quite being all the way inside your own body.

If any of that sounds familiar, please hear this clearly. None of it means you're doing grief wrong, or that something is medically wrong with you.

It means you loved someone. And your nervous system is doing exactly what it's built to do, the slow work of adjusting to a world that has been rearranged around an absence.

Caring for the body in grief

Something else to say here, gently. Stress hormones run high in grief, and stress held that long does have real effects on the body. Grief is linked to higher rates of physical illness, particularly in the first year.

I'm not telling you this to frighten you. I'm telling you because your body has just been through something enormous, and it deserves the same care you'd give anyone recovering from a serious injury.

That might mean rest, even when it's broken. Food, even when your appetite has gone quiet. Movement, however small. And getting anything that genuinely worries you looked at, not because something's wrong with you, but because you're allowed to be looked after right now.

The body needs to be part of grief

Grief that only ever gets thought about, turned over and over in the mind but never actually felt, tends to get stuck. You already know part of why. Your body took this loss in more slowly than your mind did, and it's still taking it in, mostly through sensation rather than thought.

So the tightness in your chest, the heaviness in your limbs, the wave that rises without warning. These aren't obstacles standing between you and your grief. They are your grief, doing the work it needs to do.

This is the part I called mindfulness, and it is plainer than the word makes it sound. Not a technique, and not sitting cross-legged on a cushion. Just a willingness to notice what is happening in you, without talking yourself out of it and without disappearing into it. The wave rises. You let it. It passes.

Crying, when it comes, is part of the same process. It isn't a breakdown, and it doesn't mean you've lost control of yourself. It's your body doing what it was built to do. So is the urge to scream into a pillow, or to let out a sound with no words attached to it at all. Neither means grief has become too much for you. They're grief finding a way through.

Movement offers another kind of release. Walking especially helps burn off the stress hormones grief produces, and gives feelings that otherwise seem boundless somewhere to go. Time outdoors, even in small amounts, settles a grieving nervous system. Worth returning to, especially on the days when it's hardest to do anything at all. This won't make your grief move faster. But it may help you notice where it's already living in you, which is where the next few pages come in.

Exercise 3 Where does your grief live in your body?

Turning towards the body - Bring your awareness to your body as it is right now. Where do you feel the grief physically, and what is the quality of that feeling?

Tight, heavy, hollow, hot, numb? Is there a part of your body where you feel it most consistently?

Exercise 4 How have you been treating your body in grief?

Without judgement - *Since your loss, how have you been attending to your physical needs, rest, food, movement, medical care?*

What has been getting attention, and what has been neglected?

One small thing - *Is there one small, concrete thing you could do differently this week that would represent a slightly kinder relationship with your body in grief?*

SECTION 3

The particular shapes grief takes

Understanding the different forms grief can assume

Grief doesn't arrive in one form.

Even within the grief that follows death, it takes profoundly different shapes depending on who died, how they died, what the relationship was, and what was unresolved within it.

Understanding the particular shape of your own grief is more useful than measuring it against a generalised model.

Acute grief

In the weeks right after a death, grief is often at its most acute, overwhelming, unpredictable, and physically consuming. You may not recognise yourself.

It may come at you in waves, intense, then briefly calm, then intense again, and that calm can feel disorienting in its own way, as though feeling okay for a moment is somehow a betrayal of the loss.

If that's happening to you, it doesn't mean your grief is shallow, or that you're not feeling it fully. Your nervous system is doing this on purpose, it's the only way it can protect you from being overwhelmed all at once.

Researchers Stroebe and Schut have a name for this back-and-forth, they call it healthy oscillation, a natural swing between facing the loss head-on and simply getting on with your day. Knowing that can take some of the guilt out of the moments you're not actively consumed by grief.

Delayed grief

The acute phase may not arrive when you expect it to.

You might function with apparent competence in the weeks and months after a death, practical, present, capable, and then find yourself ambushed much later, sometimes a year or two on, when the activity and adrenaline have subsided.

Delayed grief can be confusing and frightening, precisely because it arrives when others expect you to be moving forward.

Understanding it as delayed, rather than disproportionate, can be an enormous relief.

Complicated grief

For somewhere between one in ten and one in seven of us, grief doesn't ease the way we'd expect. It stays this intense, month after month, making it genuinely hard to get through ordinary days, and the ache for the person who died never really lets up. This is now understood as prolonged grief.

If this is what you're going through, it is not a failure of character or willpower. It's a well-recognised experience, it has a name, and, importantly, there is support that helps.

Grief after a sudden or traumatic death

If the death was sudden, an accident, a suicide, a sudden illness, you likely didn't get any warning, any chance to prepare. That absence makes the grief harder, and it often comes tangled up with images and details of the death itself, intruding when you least expect them.

You may find your mind keeps circling back to the circumstances of the death, going over it again and again. That's not you dwelling, or failing to move on, it's your mind trying to process something too much to take in all at once.

This is trauma as much as it is grief, and you may need support that addresses both, not just the loss, but the shock of how it happened.

Grief after a difficult relationship

Not all grief follows the loss of a straightforward, loving relationship.

When someone dies with whom you had a complicated, painful, or ambivalent relationship, a difficult parent, an estranged child, a partner with whom things were hard, the grief can be the most isolating of all, because it does not fit the expected shape.

There may be relief alongside the sorrow, and then guilt about the relief. There may be anger that now has nowhere to go. There may be grief for the relationship you needed and never had, alongside grief for the person.

All of this is legitimate grief. None of it needs to be explained or justified.

Exercise 5 What shape is your grief taking?

Recognising your own - Reading the descriptions above, which feels most resonant with your own experience?

Is your grief acute or delayed? Straightforward, or complicated by the circumstances of the death, or the nature of the relationship?

Write about the particular shape your grief has taken, what has been expected, and what has surprised you.

Exercise 6 What is complicated about your grief

The part that doesn't fit - Most grief contains something complicated, something that doesn't fit the simple narrative of love and loss.

What is complicated about yours? What have you found difficult to say to others, or to yourself?

SECTION 4

What grief asks of us

And what it does not

If grief can't be managed, or shortened, or thought through, and it can't, then the question becomes a different one.

What does grief need from you, so it can move, rather than just piling up?

The first thing it asks of you is simple, and also hard. Permission to actually feel it.

That sounds obvious, but it's the thing most of us withhold, either because everything around us is quietly signalling that we should be coping better by now, or because we're keeping the grief at arm's length with activity, work, or sheer force of will.

Grief that isn't allowed to be felt doesn't dissolve. It goes underground, and it keeps working on you there, shaping how you feel and how you behave in ways that get harder and harder to trace back to the loss.

The second thing it asks for is time. Not efficiency. Time.

Grief has its own rhythm, and it doesn't respond well to being hurried. The pressure to be productive again quickly, to be back to normal within weeks, to prove you're resilient by carrying on functioning, all of it works against the time real grieving takes.

Grief needs room in the week. Time that's protected, where it's allowed to surface, instead of being put off again and again.

The third thing it asks for is a witness. Someone to see it.

The rituals around death do something real. They say that the loss happened, that it matters, that the person who died was known and valued by others as well as by you.

When those rituals are thin, or when the support falls away too quickly, grief gets very lonely.

Looking for that witness, from those you trust, from a therapist, or through writing honestly on a page, isn't self-indulgence. It's what grief needs in order to move.

And the fourth thing it asks is that you let it be messy. That you stop expecting it to move in a straight line.

The circling back. The grief that arrives on an ordinary Tuesday morning, in the supermarket, without warning. The waves that come even when you thought you were through the worst.

That is not grief going wrong. It's how grief works. And meeting it that way, rather than with alarm, takes away the extra layer of suffering that comes from fighting the thing itself.

Grief doesn't move towards closure, a word that suggests a door you can shut firmly behind you. It moves towards integration, the loss becoming part of the story of your life in a way you can carry, rather than something that carries you.

What grief does not require

It doesn't require you to find a lesson in it, or to be grateful for the growth it produced, or to turn it into something meaningful on anybody's timetable.

Those things may come, eventually. But reached for too early, they become a detour around the grief rather than a way through it.

And going on having a relationship with the person you've lost, in memory, in the values they shaped in you, in the ways they're still somehow present, sits perfectly well alongside healthy grieving.

They don't have to disappear from your inner world for you to grieve well.

Exercise 7 What is your grief asking of you?

Listening to it - *What do you sense your grief most needs right now, more permission, more time, more witness, more patience with its non-linearity?*

What have you been withholding from it? And what might it mean to offer that?

Exercise 8 Your continuing relationship

What remains - *Is there a way in which the person you have lost remains present for you, in memory, in the values they gave you, in the ways you find yourself thinking of this person in daily life?*

Write about the continuing relationship you still have.

What do you want to carry forward, from who they were, and what they meant to you?

SECTION 5

The grief we don't talk about

The things that complicate grief and go unsaid

Every grief contains things that are hard to say out loud. Not because they're shameful, but because they don't fit the story grief is supposed to follow.

Those of us who feel relief when someone dies after a long illness, and then can't tell a soul, because relief feels like a betrayal.

Those of us who are angry. Genuinely, persistently angry, at the person who died.

Those of us who realise we didn't love the person who died in the way we were supposed to, or that the relationship was far more complicated than anyone knew.

Those of us who aren't as sad as we're expected to be, and are frightened by what that might mean about us.

These are not rare. They are extremely common.

This is the second of the three, and it is the one grief works hardest to take from you. Common humanity. Whatever you are carrying, you are not the only one who has carried it, and there is nothing wrong with you for carrying it. Grief is very good at convincing us we are the exception. We almost never are.

It just isn't talked about, because the script around grief is narrow, and whatever falls outside it gets carried in silence. Which makes the loneliness, and the suffering, a great deal worse.

Relief

Relief after the death of someone who was suffering is probably the most common of the complicated feelings, and the one that most reliably produces guilt.

Relief that the suffering has ended, theirs and yours, is a natural and humane response.

It doesn't mean you didn't love them. It doesn't mean you wanted them to die. It means you watched someone suffer, and you're glad the suffering has stopped.

Relief and grief can live in you at the same time. Both are legitimate.

Anger

Anger is a normal part of grief, and it's the feeling most of us push down hardest, because being angry at someone who has died can feel irrational, or disrespectful.

Anger at them for dying. For leaving you. For not taking better care of themselves. For the things they said, or never said. For the relationship that's now permanently unfinished. All of it is grief.

Anger with nowhere to go tends to turn inwards, where it becomes depression and a hard, unforgiving relationship with yourself. Finding some way to let the anger be acknowledged is one of the most important things you can do.

Guilt

Guilt is close to universal in grief. The things said and unsaid. The things done and left undone. The last conversation. The moment of impatience you can't now take back.

Most of that guilt isn't warranted in the way it feels.

What tends to be true is that we hold ourselves, afterwards, to a standard we could never have met at the time. Because we didn't know, then, that it was the last time.

So this is where self-kindness has to do some real work, and it is the hardest of the three to actually do. Read back what you have just been accusing yourself of, and ask whether you would say it to someone you love who had done the same thing. If the answer is no, and it almost always is, then the standard you are holding yourself to is not one you believe in. It is one you are only using on yourself.

The things that were never resolved

Perhaps the loneliest grief of all follows a death in a relationship that was never finished. Where something important was never said, never repaired, never given the chance to become what it might have been.

The parent you had a difficult relationship with. The sibling you hadn't spoken to in years. The friend it ended badly with, who died before either of you found a way back.

That grief holds not just the loss of the person, but the loss of the possibility.

And possibility is an unusually painful thing to grieve, because it asks you to mourn something you never actually had.

Exercise 9 What you have not been able to say

The unspoken - *What is the thing, or things, about your grief that you have found most difficult to say to anyone?*

Not because it is wrong, but because it does not fit the expected script, or because you were not sure it was allowed.

Exercise 10 What you would still like to say

One more thing - *If you could say one more thing to the person you have lost, anything at all, what would it be? Write it without editing, without performing for an audience. This is entirely private.*

SECTION 6

Holding ourselves through grief

Meeting what rises with curiosity rather than judgement

Self-compassion has been running underneath everything so far, and this is where it comes to the surface. You have met all three of Neff's components by now. Mindfulness, in the pages about the body. Common humanity, in the things we do not talk about. Self-kindness, in what guilt asks of us. What is left is the harshness itself, which is worth looking at directly, because grief brings out a particular version of it. We judge how we are grieving, too much, too little, too messily, too publicly, not enough. We judge what we feel, the relief alongside the sorrow, the anger alongside the love, the moments we forget and the moments we cannot stop remembering. We rarely receive ourselves with the same gentleness we would offer a friend in the same place.

I have found two ways of working with this that I would offer you here, not as techniques to master, but as postures you can return to.

The first is this. When a difficult feeling rises, don't push past it, and don't try to analyse your way out of it either. Just turn towards it, with real curiosity. Not "why am I like this", that's a judgement wearing a question's clothes, but "what is here right now, and what does it need." Whatever you're feeling, guilt, relief, numbness, fury, it made sense at some point, even if it doesn't serve you anymore. You don't have to fix it. You just have to get close enough to understand it.

The second is this. You are not one single self reacting to this loss, you are more like a household of different parts, and grief tends to bring most of them to the door at once. There may be a part of you that wants to collapse. A part that's determined to keep functioning no matter what. A part that's furious, at the person who died, at those around you, at how unfair it all is. A part that feels responsible, replaying everything that was said and left unsaid. None of these parts is the whole of you, and none of them needs to be silenced. Underneath all of them is a steadier centre in you that can meet each one with curiosity instead of alarm.

Held together, these two offer a way of being with grief that is neither indulgent nor avoidant. You are not trying to feel better quickly. You are trying to be in honest relationship with whatever is actually here.

The aim of what follows is not insight for its own sake, but a slightly different relationship with whatever has arrived, one with a little more room in it.

Exercise 11 A practice you can return to

The next time a wave of grief arrives, whether as sadness, anger, guilt, numbness, or something you don't have a word for, try pausing and asking, silently or on paper.

What part of me is present right now?

What is it afraid would happen if I didn't feel this way?

What does it need from me, right now, not forever, just right now?

Can I stay with it for a moment, without trying to change it?

SECTION 7

The sixth stage

Finding meaning

Section 1 set out the five stages, and why they were never meant as a sequence. There is a later addition to that model, and this is where it belongs.

The psychologist David Kessler, who worked alongside Kübler-Ross, later proposed a sixth stage. Meaning. Meaning, as he describes it, is not a way around the pain, and it does not arrive on any fixed schedule. It is something closer to a second, parallel thread, a slowly forming understanding of what this loss has shown you, asked of you, or changed in you. It might mean recognising the fragility of life, or being moved to make some change so that others don't suffer in the same way. It might be a renewed closeness with family, or a recommitment to something the person you lost cared about.

Let me be careful here, because “finding meaning” can easily curdle into another way of judging yourself, another stage to fail at, another box to tick. It isn't that. It is not required, and it does not arrive for everyone in the same way, or on the same timeline, or sometimes at all. It is simply something you may eventually notice forming, often without having gone looking for it.

Exercise 12 Questions to sit with

A few questions to sit with, whenever you're ready, not now, necessarily, and not on any deadline.

Has anything shifted in how you see your own life, since this loss?

Is there anything you find yourself wanting to do differently, or more of, because of what happened?

Is there a way you can imagine carrying this person forward with you, rather than leaving the relationship behind, as you continue living?

SECTION 8

Finding the right level of support

Understanding your options

Grief after death is one of the most universal of human experiences, and also one in which the right level of support varies enormously from one of us to the next.

Some of us move through grief with the support of those around us, and find that time does most of the work.

Or grief may get complicated, by the nature of the loss, by the history of the relationship, by earlier unprocessed losses the current one has reactivated, and that something more is needed.

Neither of these reflects on how much you loved, or how much the loss matters.

What you can do on your own

Allowing yourself to grieve, to feel what you feel, without requiring it to be tidy or proportionate or finished by a particular point, is the most fundamental thing you can do for yourself.

In a culture that consistently pushes you towards faster recovery and visible resilience, choosing to give grief the time and space it needs is an active and meaningful decision.

Writing about your loss, whether here, in a structured workbook, or in a private journal, helps. Putting words to what you feel turns a heavy, shapeless weight into something you can actually look at, sit with, and slowly make sense of.

Marking anniversaries, visiting the places that mattered, keeping some kind of ongoing connection with the person who has died, none of this means you're holding on in an unhealthy way. Staying connected like this is a normal, healthy part of grief. It's a way of carrying the loss with you, not denying it.

And seeking the company of those who knew the person who died, sharing memories, acknowledging the loss together, provides a quality of witness that cannot be replicated any other way. You do not have to carry it entirely alone.

When therapy can help

Therapy for grief is not only for when you are falling apart.

It can help any time your grief feels complicated, by how the death happened, by a difficult relationship, by old losses this one has stirred back up, or simply because you need somewhere steady and consistent to do this work.

A skilled therapist provides what grief most needs, a consistent, non-judgemental witness who can hold what is brought without being overwhelmed by it, and who can help you find words for what has not yet been spoken.

The experience of being truly seen in grief, with all its complicated feelings, its anger and relief and guilt alongside the sorrow, and finding that the response is steady, compassionate presence rather than judgement, is itself a healing experience for many of us.

Some ways of working are particularly suited to grief that reaches back into earlier wounds, when the death of a parent, for example, has reactivated grief for the parent you needed and never quite had. Others are suited to grief where parts of you have developed specifically to manage it, to stay strong, to keep functioning, to not fall apart, and those protective strategies are now working against what the grief needs. Both are worth asking a therapist about.

Specific approaches for complicated and prolonged grief, including the work developed by Katherine Shear, have strong supporting evidence, and are worth seeking out if grief has remained intensely acute well beyond the expected period.

When more support may be needed

If grief has produced significant depression, a persistent inability to function, the loss of the capacity to experience anything positive, thoughts of harming yourself or a wish not to be alive, psychiatric assessment is appropriate and important.

The loss of a loved one is one of the most common triggers for a depressive episode, and depression that develops in the context of grief responds to treatment just as it does in any other context. Your GP is the right starting point.

If you are having thoughts of suicide, or of not wanting to be here, please do not manage this alone. Grief can produce these thoughts even if you have never felt this way before. Please speak to someone you trust, contact a crisis line, or go to your nearest emergency department.

A simple way to think about it

If your grief is painful but you're still able to function, it can help to start where you are, let yourself feel it, write, lean on those you trust, keep the rituals that keep you connected to the person you've lost.

It may be worth reaching out to a therapist if the death itself, the relationship, or older losses have made this harder to carry. If there are things you haven't been able to say to anyone. If you're still struggling to function well past the first few weeks. If it has stayed this acute for more than a year. Or if grieving alone has become its own kind of pain.

And please seek a psychiatric assessment if depression has set in alongside the grief, if daily life, eating, washing, getting up, has become a struggle, or if you're having thoughts of not wanting to be alive.

Whatever level of support you seek, the most important thing this workbook asks of you is to take your grief seriously.

To give it the time, attention, and care it deserves.

To stop measuring it against a model of how long it should take, or how it should look.

Grief is the price of love. It does not need to be efficient. It needs to be felt.

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About Shelagh MacFarlane, MSc

Shelagh MacFarlane is a Canadian-British counselling psychologist with more than 20 years in private practice. She has lived in Southeast Asia for 26 years and works with clients across the world via Zoom. Before retraining as a psychologist, Shelagh had a career as a professional orchestral violinist, an experience that shaped her understanding of performance, perfectionism, and the psychological cost of maintaining a composed exterior when the interior is anything but.

Her approach

Shelagh works integratively, drawing on Internal Family Systems (IFS), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Compassionate Inquiry (developed by Dr Gabor Maté), inner-child work, Gestalt techniques, and mindfulness-based approaches. She does not apply a single model to every person. The work is shaped by who you are, where you are, and what you need. She works with individuals, couples, and families. Her particular areas of focus include anxiety, burnout, life transitions, relationship difficulties, identity questions, expat mental health, and the long-term psychological effects of growing up or living between cultures.

Qualifications and background

- MSc Counselling Psychology — United Kingdom
- Counselling Diploma — Canada
- Registered member, British Columbia Psychological Association (BCPA)
- Certified Executive Coach
- Member, International Practitioners of Holistic Medicine (IPHM)
- Trained in Compassionate Inquiry (Dr Gabor Maté)
- Former crisis line counsellor, Befrienders Malaysia
- Volunteer counselling: Malaysian Cancer Society, All Women's Action Society, UNHCR (supporting Afghan and Myanmar refugees)
- Communications and life-skills training across Asia, Africa, and the United States

Get in touch

Shelagh offers a free 15-minute initial consultation by WhatsApp or video call, with no obligation and no pressure. This is a chance to ask questions, to get a sense of whether the fit feels right, and to understand what working together might look like. Sessions are held by video call at times that work across time zones. Every enquiry is handled personally by Shelagh, and treated with complete discretion.

Free discovery call 15 min · No obligation · shelagh-psychologist.com

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Online sessions Asia · Worldwide · All time zones welcome

Specialties Anxiety · Burnout · Life transitions · Relationships · Expat mental health · Identity

Credentials MSc Counselling Psychology (UK) · BCPA Registered · Certified Executive Coach · IPHM Member

THE SERIES

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This workbook is part of a growing series of gentle, practical guides for the difficult parts of being human — each written to be worked through at your own pace, and to meet you where you are.

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When worry has become the background hum of your life.

02 The Relationship with Yourself

The most important relationship you will ever have — the one with you.

03 Living with Depression

When the colour has drained out, and effort no longer seems to reach.

04 Grief That Doesn't Have a Name

For the losses that come without a funeral, and are grieved alone.

05 Navigating a Life Transition

For the in-between — when one chapter has ended and the next has not begun.

06 The Burnout Workbook

When you are exhausted in a way that sleep no longer fixes.

07 Relationships That Hurt

Understanding the patterns that draw us into painful relationships.

08 Stuckness

When you don't know what's wrong — only that something is.

09 The Addiction Workbook

When the thing that helps has become the thing that hurts.

10 When Someone Dies

A map for grief that has a name, but looks nothing like we expect.

11 The Wounded Child

How what happened in childhood is still shaping your life today.

12 The Anger Workbook

For the person who carries anger — and the person who lives with theirs.

If this workbook has been helpful, you may find others in the series speak to something you are carrying too.

Explore the full collection at shelagh-psychologist.com

*Grief is the price of love.
It does not need to be efficient.
It needs to be felt.*



Grief after death is the loss our culture has the most language for, and in some ways the least accurate understanding of. This workbook offers a more honest map — what grief actually involves, what it does to the body and mind, the particular shapes it takes, and what it quietly needs — with space for all of it: the love, the complicated history, the relief and the guilt, the grief that makes sense and the grief that doesn't.

INSIDE YOU'LL FIND:

-  What grief after death actually involves
-  The body in grief — why physical symptoms are not a sign something is wrong
-  The particular shapes grief takes
-  What grief asks of us — and what it does not
-  The grief we don't talk about
-  How to find the right level of support

*Grief does not move toward closure —
a door that can be firmly shut.*

*It moves toward integration: the loss
becoming part of the story of your life.*

— Shelagh MacFarlane



Shelagh MacFarlane

MSc Counselling Psychology (UK)

BCPA Registered (Canada)

20+ years in private practice



Shelagh is a counselling psychologist with over 20 years of experience helping adults navigate grief, loss, and life's challenges with compassion, curiosity, and clarity.



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