

## **Bowel Cancer UK 'Dealing with grief' transcript**

### **Dr Robin Muir, Clinical Psychologist, Maggie's**

My name is Robin Muir. I am a Clinical Psychologist, and I'm also the Centre Head of Maggie's Manchester based at the Christie Hospital in Manchester.

### **Managing grief**

So I think one of the biggest challenges for somebody that is grieving is the potential isolation that they might feel. And that can be despite the fact that they are surrounded by people that they love. Grief is something which changes the way that we relate to the world and the people around us. So previously, everyday conversations may no longer feel enjoyable as they once were, and that can be very isolating for a person.

To cope with that, I think it's important that we find ways of caring for ourselves. That starts by acknowledging how we feel. Grieving and bereavement can be a time where we feel very overwhelmed by emotions. We can also worry that what we feel is not normal, that there might be something wrong with us.

It's important for us to recognise that that's a very common experience and there are lots of different emotions and thought processes that make up the grieving process. Acknowledging that then allows us to stop fighting with it, stop tussling with it so much, and start to find ways of coping with it. And that can be as basic as the things which we've been doing throughout our lives to help us cope with stressful and difficult moments.

Some suggestions that I would always give to somebody would be particularly around physical activity, caring for ourselves, and making sure that we're eating well. But one that I think [is] very, very important is finding ways to connect with other people, which can be challenging when we feel so different from the people around us. It might be that we might choose to connect with different people at this time.

I feel that in the work I do at Maggie's, that people get a lot from connecting with other people who are going through something similar. Our bereavement support groups are somewhere where people can find that connection with other people, and they can feel less isolated by the experience that they're currently having.

But I think we can also connect with our friends and family at these difficult times. Sometimes we feel that we don't want to tell other people how we feel because we worry about how we might burden them or we might upset them. But I think one important reflection I have is that none of us grieve in isolation, that we cannot grieve in a vacuum, that actually, we grieve and we go through those processes as families.

Some of the most important work we do when we are grieving is in the conversations that we have about the person that we lost, about how we feel, and maybe about the events that have brought us to this point within our lives. So finding any connection in this difficult time can actually be really helpful to help you recognise that you are, most definitely, not alone.

## **Coming to terms with losing a loved one**

One of the things which I've seen in the work that I do at Maggie's is that when people are bereaved, it is not simply about the ending of that person's life that they've experienced. But it's the experience of how they and their loved ones have gotten to that point – the process of somebody becoming unwell, having treatment, experiencing side effects, and all of the many disappointments that lead to someone's death.

It's very important that when we are bereaved that we consider that there is a recovery process from going through that journey. One of the most important things is to acknowledge that that is happening and that there will be a time within your life, (as you recover from a very high level of stress, and there may be things that you were witness to), that do not sit comfortably with you. So sometimes you may experience, sort of, intrusive memories around those events. You may experience nightmares as well. And those things are fairly normal, following the death of a loved one.

And we can cope with those by allowing ourselves to think and talk about those experiences. The brain has a mechanism which motivates us to do that. That's why we often experience intrusive memories of these events. It's the brain's way of trying to say "you need to think about this, you need to talk about it". And through doing that, we start to develop a narrative or a story, so to speak, of what happened at the end of that person's life. And through doing that processing, those experiences become more tolerated, and hopefully recede into the background of our memory of that person.

We can do things to help ourselves with that experience. So again, all good self-care will be helpful. So [for example] physical activity, relaxation exercises, talking to other people, [and] acknowledging how we feel. One particular strategy, which I found is very helpful to people when they're experiencing this is something called the 54321 technique. So this is where, I may experience something which is quite upsetting to me, and I want to ground myself in the present moment. So what I would do is I would notice five things that I can see, four things that I can feel, three things that I can hear, two things I can smell, and one thing that I can taste. And that just reminds us that we're here in the present moment, and brings us back from wherever our brain has, kind of, landed us.

## **Grieving and feelings of guilt**

A particularly common reaction when somebody is grieving is, at some point, a feeling of guilt arising. Now, that can arise for a number of different reasons. But I think one of the most common causes for those feelings of guilt is when somebody starts to move into a phase of their grieving process where perhaps they are doing things for themselves again. That might be steps that they're taking, such as returning to work, or perhaps socialising again.

They might not be things that we necessarily want to do. We might not have redeveloped or recovered that motivation, but [are things] that we have to do. Sometimes they are things that we do want to do and we've recovered that motivation.

I think where we see it is often [when] somebody will describe how, perhaps they were watching something on TV, and they had a moment of enjoyment in a TV programme, or it was a conversation with a loved one where they laughed for the first time. And that feeling of enjoyment will often then actually trigger intense feelings of guilt.

Now, I think that that often arises because we have in our minds that grieving is a process, which is exclusively [involving], what we might see as negative emotions or unpleasant emotions, like

sadness, or anxiety or anger. But actually, I think it's important that we should recognise that grieving is a process of both those sorts of feelings; of feelings that we think about around loss, but also feelings that arise out of recovery and rehabilitation. [A process] where, as we recover into a life, a new life, which is adapted to the loss of this person, there should be and there will be, moments of enjoyment once again. They're more complicated now, because when they arise it's very common for us to feel guilt. And that might at times hold us back from doing some of that recovery stuff.

What I would suggest for anybody who's experiencing that feeling of guilt, is to just first recognise that feelings of enjoyment [and] pleasant emotions, and grieving are not mutually exclusive and not separate experiences. That as somebody who is grieving, you can experience very intense emotions [that] are pleasant and unpleasant, and move between [them] incredibly quickly. And that's a very normal experience around grief.

If you are experiencing that, what I would say is to, rather than fight that feeling of guilt, to notice when it arises. Just notice that for what it is – it's guilt that's coming about from this tension between these two different processes within grieving – and then focus on what you would like to do which is best for you, and your wellbeing. Okay, so finding that balance position between allowing yourself to do recovery, but also engaging in the feelings of loss you have around your bereavement. And obviously, all good self-care should be going around bereavement – making sure that you look after yourself.

### **Dealing with practical matters**

So I think one of the hardest things that people who are bereaved experience, is some of the processes and the kind of admin that unfortunately, arises around the death of a loved one, that can be potentially very overwhelming to a person at obviously, a very vulnerable time in their lives.

That process of working through these tasks, I think has become more complex as our lives have developed and become more complex. Particularly with the internet, we see the impact of things like Facebook, and stuff like that, and how do we undo some of these accounts, things like that.

What I would say is to kind of recognise that that's a very real thing that has to be managed and to prioritise that. It doesn't all have to be done immediately – it can be something which you stagger over time. And if you're going to do that staggering over time, what becomes really important is to just prioritise. So maybe having a list of some of the things you need to do and then thinking, well, "What's the most important? What do I have to do first?", and then working through that.

What I'd also say is really important and can be really helpful is to use boundaries. So maybe creating a little bit of time, perhaps on a daily or maybe a weekly basis (whatever works well for you), to do that sort of admin stuff, those tasks, at just that time. Otherwise what can happen is these tasks start to bleed into different aspects of your life and you might find yourself just doing [these tasks] all of the time. Other things in your life, which might be a priority too, such as looking after yourself, start to move on to the backburner. And so having those priorities, but also those boundaries can be really helpful.

Another tip I would give to people is use help. So there are services, which will help you to do some of these tasks. So there is the government service [Tell Us Once](#), which basically means you have to tell this service that your loved one has died and then they will tell all other government agencies that this person has passed away. And there's a few different services that are like this, that can do some of those tasks for you as well.

You might also use friends and family who might be able to do some of these things for you, so that you can share these tasks in these roles as a family. Most importantly though, while you are

doing this, it's really important to not neglect self-care and to make sure that you have time to do something for yourself, whether that's going for a walk, having a nice bath, looking after yourself – whatever it might be for you – that just means that you keep the balance between doing these tasks, but also looking after yourself.

## **Remembering life before bowel cancer**

I think one of the most difficult things that people who are bereaved face is that our minds tend to focus on recent events and there's a very important reason for that. And that's because the brain and the mind are trying to process what has happened to you and the people that you love. It's trying to make sense of that and it's trying to move those experiences into memory.

Now obviously, those memories and recent events are incredibly emotive to somebody who is bereaved. And that can feel at times a very overwhelming process. It's a very normal process. And it's one that we have to help ourselves, to kind of, move through. We should avoid getting into a tussle with it and trying to fight it.

What will happen over time is, if you allow yourself to talk about what you're experiencing, feelings that you have, thoughts that you're having, (whether that be with a close loved one, or somebody that you've turned to for professional support), that those memories will over time, fade into natural parts of that person's life, rather than being the dominant thing, [you] remember from them.

I think there's other things that you can also do, which are a little bit more active to help yourself cope with that. And that might be allowing yourself to remember other parts of this person's life, which might involve looking at photos, talking to other loved ones about those different aspects of this person, [and] making sure that this person's identity is not defined by an illness that they had, or what they died of. And hopefully, what we will experience over time is those memories of illness and death start to recede into the background. And we're left with a much more full and complete memory of the person.

## **Getting support**

One of the biggest sources of support I think, around bereavement will always be your friends and family. I'm a big supporter, a champion, of how we don't grieve in isolation – we grieve with the people that we love. We grieve with the people who have also loved that person that we've lost. And I think it's important that we reach out to those people.

Those can be complex conversations, because often we worry about burdening other people and upsetting them. Very rarely does that occur though and I think that actually we can often find great comfort in people we love the most. Other forms of support, maybe outside of that; Maggie's centres are very good at providing bereavement support. All of our centres across the UK provide bereavement support on a very regular basis. So please feel free to reach out to us.

In terms of NHS support, I would suggest that contacting your GP can be a really good starting point. They should be able to help you navigate some of the services that would be available to you in everyone's area – in England at least. Scotland's a little different. You have something called Increasing access to psychological therapy services, and they work with people who are bereaved. But your GP would be able to inform you of what that service is called and how you would access them. And then there's also Cruse bereavement, which are a charity which works specifically with people that are bereaved, providing various different forms of support.

For more support and information visit [\*\*bowelcanceruk.org.uk/bereavement\*\*](https://bowelcanceruk.org.uk/bereavement)