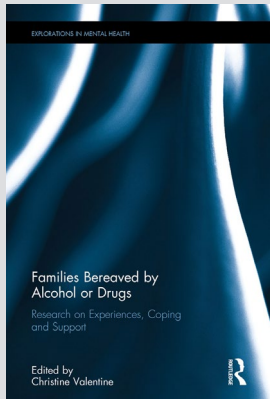


# Book Reviews



## Families bereaved by alcohol or drugs: research on experiences, coping and support

Edited by Christine Valentine

London: Routledge  
2018  
978-1-138-94708-5

This book is the result of a major project which investigated the experiences of people bereaved in a way which leaves many feeling stigmatised and vulnerable, but because it employed a qualitative methodology, their voices are heard in its detailed extracts. The second stage used focus groups made up of a wide variety of practitioners in health, social care and the criminal justice system who play a role following a drug or alcohol-related death. The results were developed into five key messages to guide good practice in the future.

Part 1 describes how families living with substance use deal with the death; how they feel the stress, the strain, how they cope and the need for support. Each situation is individual and families have to navigate a formal system which is often complex and unsympathetic, depending on the circumstances. Many describe the stigma attached to such a bereavement, because it is seen as self-caused, and reflects blemishes of character or an uncaring family. The public remembrance may induce feelings of shame particularly if the death or the inquest was reported in the media, and the private remembering has all the hallmarks of traumatic loss.

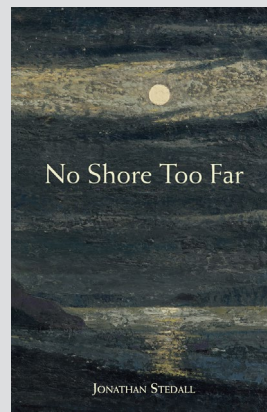
Part 2 refers to the practitioners who provide for the bereaved in such circumstances and how they may be crucial in providing information about further support. Often they are not specialists in either bereavement or addiction but have other public duties and these deaths may be seen to interfere with their work. The key messages are primarily directed to this group:

- Show kindness and compassion
- Language is important
- Every bereaved person is an individual
- Everyone can make a contribution
- We need to work together

What I liked about this book is that it very clearly describes the research itself, has much descriptive detail for those people involved in bereavement and addictions and has such important messages for all practitioners. Beforehand, I had a hunch that something would be missing and it was. Since prescribed drugs have the potential to do similar damage to bereaved families, maybe that will be the next agenda for research. ■

## Diane Hammersley

Chartered Counselling Psychologist



## No shore too far

Jonathan Stedall

Stroud, Glos: Hawthorn Press  
2017  
144 pages  
978 1 907359 81 1  
Hardback: £12

Stedall was a documentary film maker at the BBC and he has brought his breadth of vision into play in this book of poems - 'meditations on death, bereavement and hope' - written after the death of his wife from cancer. They range from the very personal moments between husband and wife as they face the inevitable, and then soar into the cosmos on a search for 'what does life mean?' He has some of the poems available on his website [www.jonathanstedall.co.uk](http://www.jonathanstedall.co.uk) and I was interested to see that a couple of the ones I had picked out have also been selected for that page.

'Marmalade' was for me the most poignant - the memories of making marmalade that are relived each time a jar is opened.

*But now there's only one jar left,  
and that I'll have to keep;  
for stored up there  
is treasure rare  
which helps me not to weep.*

So many of our clients have felt the same kind of dilemma with the mementos of their loved ones. How much do you hold onto things, how much must you live your life and let them go?

We are all familiar with the robin who accompanies the gardener as they loosen the soil for worms, and 'That Robin' captures that sense of a special relationship, particularly when the bird revisits when the loved one is gone.

*That robin who became so tame  
when you were ill  
is back again,  
but not so close.*

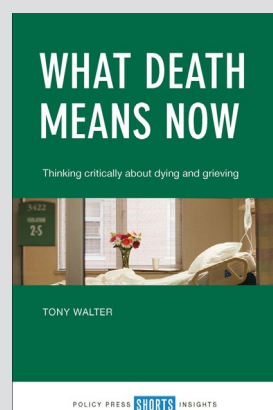
'Time and Space' invites us to explore the concepts of infinity and eternity and then draws us back with the thought that neither are within our grasp, and maybe that there is more to life and death than we can perceive.

*Suggest an insight,  
maybe a hunch  
That something else behind the scenes,  
a something hard to grasp  
enfolds us now.*

There are many poems that caught me for a moment to reflect on loved ones that have died, but equally that asked a question or offered a different kind of insight on things we take for granted in our world. I feel this is a good book for personal contemplation, and also for selecting individual poems that may be suited to a client's situation or explored in a support group. ■

## Janet Dowling

Cruse Bereavement Care Volunteer



## What death means now

Tony Walter

Bristol: Policy Press  
2017  
136 pages  
978 1 78592 758 4

Like other mysteries of our human condition such as birth and love, death is a paradoxical mystery. It is a singular event and also a journey. It is a universal experience while being for each of us unique. It is an absolute ending yet holds as well a strange continuity. The

ultimate unfathomability of death has led poets, writers, philosophers, counsellors, scientists and bereaved people all over the world to use many different philosophical and linguistic frameworks to find meaning and give expression to our personal and collective experiences of death. In his book 'What Death Means Now', Tony Walter brings the language of sociology to bear upon an exploration of modern death. He is an Honorary Professor in Sociology at the University of Bath's Centre for Death & Society, and therefore offers a different perspective from those psychotherapists or counsellors might be more familiar with.

The book's subtitle is 'Thinking critically about dying and grieving.' Critical thinking has been defined as making clear, reasoned judgments using ideas that are well thought out in an intellectually disciplined manner based on empirical evidence. This approach, a mainstay of much academic thought and research, is therefore often in conflict with the more intuitive and empathic approach counsellors tend to use when working with dying and bereavement. Yet these differences are exactly what make this book challenging and thought provoking.

Walters explores the role of social media in modern experiences of grieving, he examines the medicalisation of death and dying, he looks at how changes in community have impacted our familiarity and experiences of death, and he analyses many conflicting ideas around death. I found all this very interesting yet for me the most potent dimension of the book lies in Walter's challenge to many assumptions we can so easily make in relation to death and grief. For example, he critically examines the commonly held belief that it is better for mourners to express their grief than repress it, that parents should hold their dead babies before saying goodbye, that it is good to talk about death more openly. He suggests that we need to look more closely at evidence before making such assumptions. He cites research, for example, showing that mothers who held their dead babies were more depressed and anxious one year later than those mothers who did not.

Now, I would suggest this is not really conclusive evidence for anything other than the complexity of our relationship with death. Some mothers may need to simply 'get on with it' and move on from the loss without this. Other mothers may need to hold their dead babies because they feel the loss in their bodies more. The 'feeling' mothers are then more naturally going to speak of feeling anxiety and sadness later. Empirical research contributes greatly to our understanding of ourselves, but when it comes to the profundities of love and death, it is limited because we can observe and report on only few aspects of the complex and paradoxical phenomenon of death. But this empirical perspective also makes the book compelling in that it challenges us to think for ourselves beyond automatic assumptions. To help us in this self-reflection, questions at the end of each chapter take us even deeper into examining our own beliefs.