

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.*

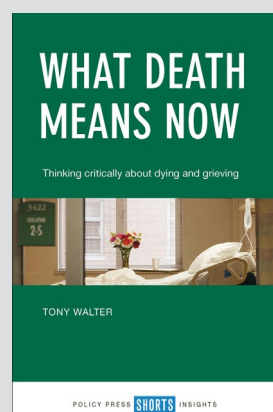
'Time and Space' invites us to explore the concepts of infinity and eternity and then draws us back with the thought that neither are within our grasp, and maybe that there is more to life and death than we can perceive.

*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.

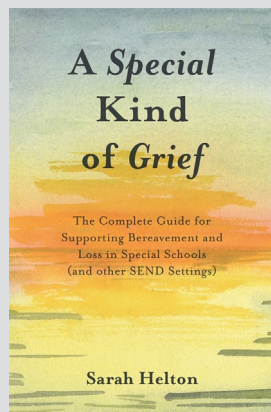
Now, I would suggest this is not really conclusive evidence for anything other than the complexity of our relationship with death. Some mothers may need to simply 'get on with it' and move on from the loss without this. Other mothers may need to hold their dead babies because they feel the loss in their 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.

Being challenged about some of the intrinsic tenets of the death awareness movement can only enrich our understanding. And although I disagree with some of his portrayals of the death movement, and would challenge and confront many of the intrinsic tenets of *his* position, I will be recommending this book to many. I would certainly recommend it to counsellors and medical practitioners working with grief and loss in relation to death. I would also suggest it is essential reading for trainings in counselling and nursing work with dying and bereavement.

Death is such a potent and complex phenomenon that in our modern culture sociological critical thinking needs to be part of any meaningful contemporary conversation about death - despite that it might also lead to heated arguments! But dialogue between differing views and languages is how understanding evolves. Even though critical thinking is inevitably lacking in some vital aspects of our comprehension of death and dying, Walter is right, it has not been sufficiently brought into the conversation. I hope his book will to some extent remedy this. ■

## Anne Geraghty

Author of 'Death, the Last God: A Modern Book of the Dead'



## A special kind of grief: the complete guide for supporting bereavement and loss in special schools and other SEND settings

Sarah Helton

2017

London: Jessica Kingsley

Pages: 180

ISBN: 978 1 78592 273 2

'A special kind of grief' is a very thorough approach to death, bereavement, grief and loss for people with Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) written by a SEND trainer and consultant with over 20 years experience in the UK and US. It opens with the statistic that from the moment that a child enters a special school until the day they leave, they could have experienced one death per year for each school year, thus 12 in their short lifetime. This is more than the mainstream population will have experienced, and not counting any bereavement they might have had in their own family situations. This book aims to support the schools in identifying the issues that they will have to address when deaths occur and how to acknowledge the grief in a meaningful way. This is from the point where the death has happened and

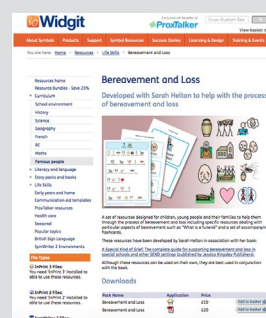
the community of staff, pupils and wider community need to be informed, to looking in detail on the effect on the pupils and the staff, along with practical suggestions for managing the school environment and developing appropriate policies.

Helton covers some of the theoretical ground about how grief affects children of different ages and different cognitive levels—including a table that provides a useful overview of the child's understanding, and typical reactions and behaviours. The behaviours of grieving children are addressed and highlight the needs of the non-verbal child who might be overlooked because their withdrawal doesn't register as a behavioural challenge. There is a comprehensive chapter on ways to support grieving children, which includes the use of Widgit symbols (see accompanying review) and guidance on talking with the children as well as 'things not to say'. The author gives practical advice about talking about funerals, cremations and burials, and addresses other forms of grief and loss including changing schools or even the death of a fictional character on a TV show. The impact on staff is often overlooked, and she provides ways staff can be supported as well as outline policies for the school.

It's a very comprehensive book, an easy read with many checklists and highlighting of areas to be addressed in schools. For the grief counsellor it provides a guide to the issues for SEND children (and adults) which need to be incorporated into their practice. Like many publications that identify the nuts and bolts of a situation, this book would also be useful for mainstream schools to check against their own processes and procedures. ■

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## Bereavement and loss symbol resource pack

Sarah Helton

2017

Available from Widgit at <https://www.widgit.com/resources/lifefskills/personal-social/bereavement/index.htm>

This resource pack has been designed to complement the chapter on 'Ways to support grieving children' in Helton's 'A special kind of grief; the complete guide for supporting bereavement and loss in special schools and other SEND settings'. However, it can also be used as a stand alone resource.