

# Editorial

Jacqui Stedmon

This issue brings into contrast the many ways in which we can encounter grief, whether by directly confronting our own intense emotions when a loved one dies, or through offering professional support to bereaved people. Although bereavement is an everyday occurrence it remains surrounded by relative taboos, leading us to diminish the proper place of sorrow and solace, shy away from laughter and deny the spark of sexuality that once belonged to an intimate relationship. No wonder lay people may find it hard to support family and friends through their bereavement journeys.

In a moving account of her brother Graham's sudden death, Ruth Harrison reflects on what she learned from living through a private experience that shared marked resonances with her own work. Having previously conducted research into the impact of traumatic death on families, she was no stranger to the emotional aftermath of abrupt loss. Harrison's honest autobiographic account reminds us that professional understanding provides no barrier to the rawness and intensity of private grief.

That Graham was treated with love and dignity was important to his family so it may come as a stark surprise that Robyn Perkins chose to share her own suffering after her boyfriend died through the medium of stand-up comedy. In our Bereavement in the Arts interview Perkins says our deepest darkest thoughts can provide the most powerful material for humour, having the potential to be transformed into vibrant, energy-charged and funny commentary. It is a testament to her talent for engaging with an audience that she has been able to attune to an element of discomfort and share her own process of grieving, including being open about 'the sexual side of things'. Within her narrative she recognises that bereavement will always be a part of 'who I am' and that she will never be 'over it' (nor want to be).

Such subjective truths must be encompassed in academic theory and Chris Hall's timely review of the literature charts the paradigm shifts that have transformed our understanding of the human experience of loss. Both personal narratives in this issue attest to the simple fact that 'grief is the price we pay for love' and Hall's article tracks how earlier stage theories of grief have been rejected to make way for accounts that attend to individual differences in both trajectories of the grief pathway over time and the balance of processes that characterise dealing with loss and restoring normal functioning. Attachment theory and meaning reconstruction following loss are presented as ample frameworks for understanding different types of loss. From a postmodern perspective, continuing bonds with the deceased are

acknowledged to be socially constructed and play both a personal and social function in adaptation to bereavement. Complicated forms of grieving are recognised and a need is identified for grief interventions to be tailored.

Clinical research points to the conclusion that no 'one-size-fits-all' model or approach to grief is justifiable. It is perhaps no surprise that lay people should struggle to find ways of responding appropriately to family and friends who are facing loss. Nina Jacoby's research identifies a discrepancy between the bereavement literature – which promotes the need for people to talk about their grief – and the practical difficulties they encounter in so doing. An online survey conducted across German-speaking European communities identified that most bereaved individuals chose to talk to family and friends. Very few people said they would have liked to talk to a counsellor but couldn't. However, nearly 40% experienced difficulty in talking, particularly fearing being a burden.

The study by Chidley *et al* suggests that children can be helpful in alleviating some aspects of the grieving process. The authors looked at attachment style, atypical grief and life satisfaction in a sample of women with small children who had experienced a significant bereavement during motherhood. None of the sample met full criteria for Prolonged Grief Disorder, despite struggling with the burden of grief. Qualitative data suggested that motherhood gave them an added sense of purpose in life, and looking after children not only served as a distraction from their own grief, but enhanced a desire to cherish and nurture them.

While many of the articles in this issue focus on the resourcefulness and resilience of people to make sense out of loss, with comfort provided by close family and friends, those most vulnerable often turn to professional support. This issue's Spotlight on Practice introduces the new Bereavement Care Standards launched this January. The standards aim both to set minimum criteria for bereavement services and to identify markers of enhanced quality. It is expected that commissioners will use them to ensure that service receivers will be met with compassion, best practice and good governance by all providers of bereavement care.

This issue of *Bereavement Care* highlights the interface of the private and personal worlds of grief within professional and public domains. The voices of experience are witness to the inner turmoil that sudden loss in particular triggers, while academic and professional approaches draw on evidence and rigour to provide a broader and largely rational perspective. Grief is multi-layered, and its many facets include fleeting reflections of joy, intimacy and laughter. ■