

Loss of a sibling: remembering Graham

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Ruth Harrison was well aware of the impact of sudden bereavement on a family following her work interviewing families who had suffered traumatic bereavement, and providing evidence-based recommendations for helping them. In this article she recounts how she lost her own brother Graham, and reflects on what she learned from living through an experience with similarities to those she had advised on professionally.

My experience of bereavement

On my brother Graham's fiftieth birthday he married his partner, Sue. Looking back it was a 'golden day' – glorious sunshine, the wedding of a brother who I was very close to, surrounded by family and friends (including my other four siblings), in an ancient setting.

Three years after the wedding I was on a girlie holiday to India when I was phoned by my partner Dave to say that Graham had died. Graham had been found slumped in the bathroom at home – the air ambulance was called but he was pronounced dead at the scene.

It was three days before a flight was available to come home and during this time friends were invaluable, being 'there' for me both day and night. All I wanted to do was to go home, to be with my family and to know that he was 'alright'. I couldn't begin to tell anyone what that meant but all I wanted to do was to see him.

Breaking the news

I am so pleased that it was Dave who broke the news to me. I remember crying out 'Not Graham' and then heard this awful wailing which I later realised was me.

My two brothers and two sisters were also very shocked. Andrew was phoned by Graham's stepson and told bluntly that Graham had died, and Roger was told when he phoned the pub. When told that he couldn't speak to Graham, Roger asked why, and was told that he was dead.

My sister Julie's immediate response when told over the phone that Graham had died was 'Don't be so silly'. Julie then phoned my other sister Sue to break the news and told her that 'Graham's gone', and Sue said 'gone where?' Both sisters struggled to believe what they were told.



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Coping with bureaucracy

Graham was alone that night and because there was no previous medical history the police and Coroner were involved, meaning that Graham's body was unable to be moved. The sequence of events that follow any sudden death swung into action. The impact of these, particularly the knowledge that Graham's body was the property of the Coroner, and that we had no rights over his body was hard to bear, especially as there was a need for information: to know 'why' and 'how'. No funeral arrangements could be made until a post-mortem was held, and the Coroner was satisfied regarding the cause of death. Following the post-mortem the Coroner agreed that there were no suspicious circumstances. Graham's heart had just stopped, and he died, very peacefully and without pain.

Viewing the body

Because we all wanted to know if Graham was 'alright', Julie and Andrew were given permission by the police to see him before he was moved by the Coroner's funeral directors. Andrew was so distressed at the scene in the bathroom that he shut the door, and Julie didn't go in. Julie and Andrew were given time to say 'goodbye' when his body was moved but Julie said that, 'It didn't look like Graham, he wasn't there, I couldn't kiss him, he was just a shell'.

Graham's wife Sue, who had also been on holiday, arrived home the day before I did and went to the funeral directors to see Graham. She took his glasses and put them on and told me that he looked very peaceful.

The following day my sister Sue and I went to see him. We walked across a small yard, with torrential rain pouring down the concrete path to a small stone room with a tin roof. The funeral director opened the door and in we went to see Graham lying in a coffin, partly on his side, looking as though he was asleep. We were given no information as to what he looked like, and nothing else was said. My overwhelming feeling on seeing him was of real relief; he looked like Graham. He had no visible injuries and I just felt that he would wake up at any point; only the fact that he was icy cold made it real. I was just so pleased and relieved to see him.

However my feelings were not shared by my sister. She saw a large bruise on his face which hadn't registered with me, and she was very angry with him for dying. She regressed into a childlike state and started to smack his hands, and to tell him what a naughty boy he was for not looking after himself (Graham had continued to smoke despite being advised not to). We tried to comfort her and in time she calmed, but the anger remained. Leaving Graham in that cold miserable place was awful. His wife decided to take him home to the pub they ran together with an open coffin so that family and friends could say their 'goodbyes'.

And that's what happened. Graham came home to the pub in Chawleigh, and we decorated the skittle alley with plants and candles so that it was a peaceful place for him to stay. His children were able to spend time alone with him as was anyone who cared for him. A book was opened for anyone to put their own personal memories of Graham in, and reading that made me realise how well loved he was. Both my sisters wrote a letter which went in the coffin as did a jar of Marmite, as he was almost addicted to it. I felt that I had talked to him enough and that he knew that I loved him.

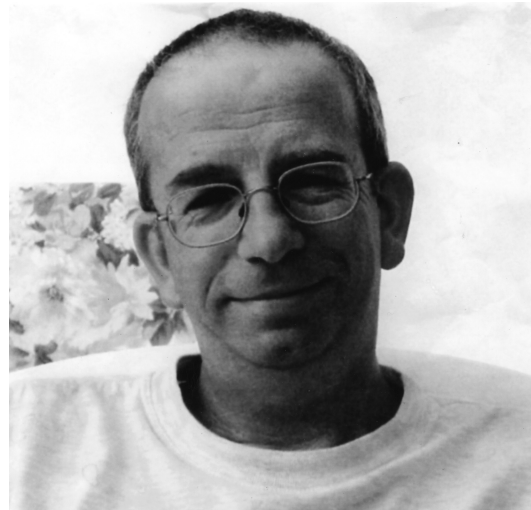
The funeral

One other event that was a real comfort to me was the funeral. Sue took great care in planning the service so that it involved his siblings, and his best friends as bearers. The funeral took place in the church where they had married just three years previously. That beautiful golden day was contrasted by the torrential rain that poured all through the funeral service and committal. The church was packed to capacity, the hymns were rousing and everyone sang their heart out, just as Graham would have wanted. My brother Roger and I both gave eulogies, and that really helped.

The wake was held at the pub, and much was made of the fact that Graham would have loved the fact that the bar was packed all night, and the takings were good. The staff refused any payment, wanting to do it for Graham.

My professional experience with sudden bereavement

In 2004 I moved from London back to my home in North Devon. Previously, I had completed a research project into the impact of homicide on families, with the aim of evidencing what, if



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anything, could make a difference. The findings were published, and I was asked to work for the Metropolitan Police Service to consider best practice, and to implement the recommendations with family liaison officers.

Many of those who were interviewed for the homicide research agreed to take part as they wanted their stories to be told, and in doing so to make a difference. As well as the Metropolitan Police Service, social services and voluntary organisations have also implemented the recommendations. The Home Office too, used the findings in an information leaflet given to bereaved children.

Much of what made a difference remains relevant to any sudden bereavement: for example, the sense of utter shock and disbelief, the need for information, and the sense of powerlessness when the body belongs to the Coroner and the grieving family has no rights over it. However, the knowledge that someone has deliberately taken the life of another is 'the worst thing that can happen to a family, it takes away joy and happiness and changes lives forever'. That quote from the research (Harrison, 1999) has stayed with me as it summed up so succinctly the devastating impact of murder on families.

Things that made a difference to my own experience

Breaking the news sensitively

One of the key research findings was the need for clear information to be given to families in a way which is understandable. Bereaved families need this to happen in order to process what has occurred. However, there are always restrictions where there is a sudden death, and information giving can be complicated by individual needs.

For example, my sisters and I were in very different places geographically when Graham died. My sisters' initial reactions were disbelief. In contrast to their experiences, and those of my brothers, my partner Dave did all the right things when he broke the news via a mobile phone call to Delhi. He asked me if I had anyone with me (I had), asked me to sit down as he had some sad news, and

then told me that Graham had died suddenly that morning. His gentleness, care and compassion made a significant difference.

Viewing the body

My research had evidenced that best practice was for family members to be given as much information as possible concerning the state of the body, in a way which could be easily understood. It was also important for anyone visiting the body to know that they could change their mind if they wanted to. So, when we reached the room where we were due to meet the funeral director I was surprised that there were no easy chairs to sit on, nothing such as flowers to brighten the room, just a lady who avoided any eye contact and typed away continuously after telling us that someone would be with us shortly.

I learnt for myself that we are all different, especially when we said 'goodbye' to Graham, and that is neither right nor wrong. To me it was such a comfort to see him, for Julie and Andrew it was very distressing. Sue reacted by showing her anger, and regressing, something I had heard of but never witnessed before. I also found it comforting just to sit by the open coffin when he was at home in the pub.

Having someone to be 'there' for me

Graham was the first of the six of us to die and it was very, very hard to deal with. I was fortunate to have a loving family and a supportive partner but their grief was not my grief – everyone deals with it differently, and as the eldest I struggled afterwards.

I was also fortunate to have friends at work who let me talk about Graham, the funeral, and concerns for Sue and his children. I cried all the way to work and back again; the car felt a safe place to grieve. Ellie, our spaniel was also a great comfort, and I spent a lot of time walking her on the beach, sometimes with Dave but often on my own. One of the siblings that I had interviewed for the research told me that she wanted someone to walk beside her for as long as it took, and I agree totally. Having close friends and family made a huge difference.

Having something to look forward to

After the funeral we decided that the five of us (it still seems bizarre to type five) would meet at least twice a year, and that the next time would be on Sue's birthday in March. It gave us something to look forward to, and we had a good time on the Norfolk Broads. Andrew continues to organise a golf match every year in Graham's memory, and has raised thousands for Devon Air Ambulance. As siblings Graham's death has brought us closer, and we talk on the phone, text and meet as often as possible.

Happy memories

The last time that I saw Graham before his death was the Sunday before I went to India. He was a real character, and one of his pet names for me was 'badger' as he never knew what colour my hair would be. But on this occasion he was different, he put his

arms around me in the bar, gave me a big hug, told me that he loved me, and to stay with Dave. So my last memory of Graham could not have been a better one, and that, compared to so many families that I have worked with, makes me very thankful.

Graham's death has made me appreciate the fact that that we had such a good relationship, there are no regrets, nothing was left unsaid. There was nothing more that any of us as siblings could have done before or immediately after his death to support our sister in law, or to ensure that Graham was treated with love and dignity. Some of this is due in part to our relationship as siblings, but also from learning from others who had endured such heartache. I knew from my work that I wasn't going mad when I couldn't remember the simplest thing, and that it's OK to drive and cry – dangerous but normal! But most of all, I learnt from others the importance of the need to say 'goodbye' – to say whatever needs to be said, and to spend as much time as you need in doing so.

In summary

Grief is a process which has to be lived through. It can't be hurried and I found that it only becomes easier to bear as the immediate rawness changes. In any sudden death the inability to say 'goodbye' is really painful, and compounds the trauma.

Our loss cannot compare in any way to the traumatised families that I came to know so well through my research. But because of their experiences, I had an understanding of sudden death and the issues that arise immediately following the death, and to me it made a difference.

However, having an understanding of the issues is very different to experiencing the utter sense of shock and disbelief, and the devastating grief that follows when someone you love dies in this way. As Julie my sister said, 'It's all like a bad dream'. Six years on, there are still times when I am overcome as something reminds me of Graham, but less now than in the early months. Music is very evocative, as are the photos which I seem to find in odd places on my computer. Until a month ago I had never found visiting his grave a comfort, but shortly after a friend had been diagnosed as terminally ill, I went to see him. I sat on the gravestone in the sunshine; it was warm and there was a real sense that he was there to comfort me. I've learnt not to question anything in regard to bereavement, accept whatever helps, even if others find it strange!

Graham was a character, and Julie summed up how we all feel by saying 'he was special, and we're so lucky not only to have known him, but that we had him as a brother'. ■

Ruth Harrison is a retired Forensic social worker, writer and authority in the field of traumatic loss. As a result of her research into traumatic bereavement she became an Honourary Fellow at Exeter University and was also awarded an Elmhurst Fellowship.

Harrison R (1999). The impact of stranger murder. *The Therapist* 6, 1 p38