I was 24 when my mother Sara died

Florence Wilkinson
Writer, Producer and Communications Professional

I've been asked to write about my experience of losing a parent in my 20s, and how I learnt to manage my grief. Manage is a good word because, as anyone who has lost someone will know, grief isn't something we can get over or move on from. It stays with us, or rather, we are left with a constant feeling that something is missing. In her novel *The God of Small Things*[1] the writer Arundhati Roy says that each loss causes a hole to appear in the universe shaped like the person who has died – a void or vacuum that has a lasting impact on our life and experiences from the moment our loved ones are gone. And yet somehow we must carry on living.

I'm wary of generalisations about young people – especially since I think the younger generation today find themselves under increasing amounts of pressure – but we do all go through different phases in our lives, and there are some patterns. Now that I'm approaching 30, more and more of my friends are settling down, some are starting to have children, progressing in their careers, thinking about things like ISAs, mortgages and pensions. In my early 20s, there was notably more dating, going out, drinking, more figuring out who we were and what we wanted from our lives. We were, at least in many respects, more carefree.

My mother and I on her birthday. I had travelled back from university to surprise her. I'm terrible at keeping secrets and spoke to her on the phone every day so not quite sure how I pulled that one off.

When you lose a parent at a young age, you also lose that carefree state – it is violently wrenched from you – and meanwhile, many of your friends are still living it. Things carry on as normal, and yet you've suddenly been exposed to some kind of horrible new truth. In the immediate aftermath it's like you're in some parallel dimension that's like our world but not – where you can hear, see and almost reach out to other people, but there's a barrier between your two worlds that you can't seem to break through.

I was 24 when my Mother died. If you're in the unlucky minority of people who lose a parent in your youth, your friends are likely to have little frame of reference for what you're going through. Some try to make comparisons with the loss of a grandparent, say, but unless they had an especially close relationship with that grandparent this isn't very helpful. Grief cannot be normalised. And at any rate, losing someone 'before their time' has an added tinge of unfairness to it, as you're always left thinking about what might have been. It's not any more painful than losing someone in old age, but there is an added level of injustice.

Together at my graduation ceremony from Oxford in 2010

One of my earliest emotions was a desperation to speak to someone who had been in a similar position and yet found a way to carry on living. I remember reaching out on social media to a couple of people I didn't know that well, afraid of sounding crazy and not wanting to dredge up difficult memories for them either, but badly wanting to speak to someone who might understand.

My only coping mechanism was to try and find a sense of purpose in all of the senseless chaos of what had happened. During the immediate aftermath I was a massive ball

1 A. Roy, *The God of Small Things*, Harper Perennial, 1997.

 DOI: 10.1080/02682621.2017.1305015

of energy, collating photo albums, making videos, doing anything and everything I could to keep busy. In the months following my Mother's death, I began a new relationship with the friend who was to become my life partner, went away to India, started a new job and bought a flat.

My Mother grew up in Devon and Cornwall and loved the sea. This is us making sand sculptures on the beach.

I took just a week off before I went back to work, and I remember one of my clients at the time taking me aside and asking 'are you sure you ought to be back yet?' To some people, I think it looked like I was bottling things up – that I wasn't giving full reign to my grief – and perhaps to some extent this was true. But for me, the only way I could keep going, keep breathing, was to keep moving. I'm sure people of different ages experience this sort of energy when they lose a loved one, but when you're young and already pretty energetic to start off with it is perhaps even more noticeable.

I was often told how 'strong' I was. This was always well meant, but the problem with telling someone who has recently been bereaved that they are strong is that this can also imply that they'll be fine, because they are strong, which can undermine the pain that they're feeling. People express grief in different ways, but this doesn't mean they feel it any less keenly. Also, they might be fine in that moment, but that doesn't mean that they are always fine, even years later. Grief can hit with a sudden intensity when you least expect it – moments after you were laughing and joking with friends for instance – which I think is particularly difficult for someone who hasn't experienced it themselves to understand.

A photo of my Mother and me at a farm. She was a big animal lover and we had a menagerie of our own when I was growing up.

And this is why we – the bereft – need to be understanding too. The last thing I would want to do is to dissuade anyone from checking in on a grieving person for fear of saying the wrong thing, because saying the wrong thing is far less hurtful than saying nothing at all. I've found, as have others I now know who have lost someone close in their 20s, that friends can be weirdly afraid to ask how you're doing, either for fear of upsetting you, or of having to face an uncomfortable answer. As a friend of mine wisely observed, if someone who has recently been bereaved gets emotional when you're talking to them, you should always remember that you're not the cause of their distress.

As well as 'strong', I was also with increasing frequency described as 'fearless'. I think in some ways I've always had this characteristic. I'm thinking back to a photo of me aged four or five that my Mother loved showing to people, where I'm crouched down in the grass, gazing directly into the eyes of a mighty beast – a Friesian cow that was at least five or six times my size. This was certainly amplified by the whole new sense of perspective I encountered when my Mother died. I vividly remember being called 'fearless' in a review at work. It was used as one of those slightly barbed compliments that no one really wants to receive. I tried (and probably failed) to articulate at the time that, once you've experienced something as terrible as the death of a parent before you've hit your mid 20s, you realise that there's not much left to be afraid of. The worst has already happened.

In his booked entitled *David and Goliath*[2], Malcolm Gladwell notes that there are a curiously high number of people in positions of power or at the top of their game who lost a parent when they were young. I'm not suggesting that I'm one of these high achievers – far from it – the examples Gladwell gives all lost a parent far younger than me, during childhood. But I do think that their success may

2 M. Gladwell, *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants*, Penguin, 2014.

Florrie (Florence) with cow.

have come from a certain 'fearlessness' forced upon them by their experiences, coupled with an impressive ability to channel the excess energy that grief creates. This might look to others like an excess of ambition, but perhaps these *eminent orphans*, as Gladwell describes them, are also driven by a constant search for purpose, and a desire to address the emptiness generated by their 'hole in the universe' which can never truly be filled.

Not long after I lost my Mother, I read Helen Macdonald's award-winning memoir, *H is for Hawk*. In it she writes:

> Imagine your whole family is in a room. Yes all of them. All the people you love. So then what happens is someone comes into the room and punches you all in the stomach. Each one of you. Really hard. So you're all on the floor. Right? So the thing is, you all share the same kind of pain, exactly the same, but you're too busy experiencing total agony to feel anything other than completely alone. *That's* what it's like![3]

It's a striking description. I had wonderful support from friends and family around me when my Mother died, and yet I still felt completely alone *in my experience*. But I found reading about MacDonald's experience, unique as it was, immensely helpful. So if we can find a way of making young people's experiences of grief that bit less lonely, then I think that this is an important first step. Then, we need to allow them to choose whatever they want to do next, and support them to find their sense of purpose in the world. As for me, I've got plenty of life left to live, and I remind myself to live twice – for myself and my Mother, who gave me life. ■

Points for practice

Dr. Kirsten Smith & Dr. Erin Hope Thompson at The Loss Foundation

The Loss Foundation is a registered charity providing support to people who have lost loved ones to cancer.

In reading this young woman's piece about the loss of her mother, she raises many important points relevant to losses at any stage of life. She also draws attention to particular difficulties that are commonly raised by the young people who seek support from The Loss Foundation. We wanted to highlight a few key issues relevant for professionals to hold in mind when working with those who suffer bereavement young.

'You also lose that carefree state'

- Young people in our groups have described loss at an early age as 'having your bubble burst.' Up to that point, you can be forgiven for thinking that life will just work out for you, everything will be fine, and there will be at least 20 or 30 years before you need to cope with loss. Losing someone at a young age can result in the 'burst bubble' feeling more unfair than it may do later in life, and also comes with other consequences. Losing someone young means that important milestones that would have been reached together such as graduating, getting a job, falling in love, or having children are experienced without their presence. Milestones that should have been happy are bittersweet because they act as painful reminders that our loved ones aren't with us. Our young members have commented that they grieve for themselves and for their loved ones in losing both the joy that they would have felt in sharing these milestones with them, and the joy that their loved ones would have felt in witnessing it. As a professional, it is important to validate and acknowledge these experiences – loss for a

3 H. Macdonald, *H is for Hawk*, Penguin Random House, 2014, p. 14.

young person will be further revisited as each milestone in life is approached without their loved one. It would be important to articulate and explore with the young person their feelings or fears about loss reverberating through their life, as well the loss of a 'carefree state.'

'I was often told how strong I was'

– There is often a desire to comment on how 'well' bereaved individuals are doing in coping with their loss. This desire may be stronger still when speaking with young people in an attempt to foster resilience and 'encourage' them to 'get back on track.' As this young woman mentioned, and as our young members tell us, someone commenting on how well they are doing can often have the opposite effect than intended. It can invalidate any distress they might be feeling and also fails to give them permission to not be ok. Often in grief, the version of ourselves we present to the world is not a true reflection of our feelings. We wear a mask to be able to get through the day. When people comment on our wellness they are often commenting on the mask we wear. We recommend being mindful before making assumptions about someone's coping or emotional resilience. A more helpful strategy may be to gently let the young person know that the therapeutic space you provide is a place where they do not need to wear the mask.

'Alone in my experience'

– This young woman's experience of social isolation in her loss, despite being surrounded by friends and family who care, is not an uncommon one. Our attempt to make bereavement less lonely led to the birth of The Loss Foundation. Our support groups for young people create a space in which discussion and expressions of grief are welcomed. Being in a group first and foremost can help the young person to recognise that their experience of grief is normal, and that while their reactions will be unique to them, the similarities that arise in the group can mean they feel less alone. Group members also problem solve from a shared viewpoint and benefit from others' experiences and perspectives. Furthermore, providing support and compassion for others activates feelings of wellbeing, safeness, and social connectedness (Gilbert, 2009). We would recommend signposting to group support if available, and if not, for professionals to consider providing such a resource to their young bereaved population. To provide group support is to provide an opportunity for individuals to realise their common humanity; to live is to feel pain, and to love is to grieve.

Gilbert P (2009). Introducing compassion-focused therapy. *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment, 15*(3) 199–208.