

catch you unexpectedly and take your breath away with its strength.

I wrote this book as a way of saying thank you to the numerous friends and relatives who have helped me on my journey back to some kind of normality, and as an inspiration to the friends, family, colleagues and neighbours of others who will one day be grieving for a much loved partner.

You can help. You can ease the pain. You can never bring back the person who has died, which is all your friend really wants. But there are dozens of things you can do to lighten the load he or she has to carry. And you can keep on doing it, not for a few weeks but for months and years. If anything, it is even more important later on than in the first hazy weeks when their world has quite simply been torn apart. It takes a long time to repair that sort of damage and it is over those long months and years that they will need your love, support and company.

It doesn't need to feel like an onerous task – many of the ideas in this book are simple, easy things that are part and parcel of friendship, but can still make a big difference to someone who is grieving.

I have written this book from the perspective of someone whose partner, husband or wife has died, which is my own experience. Yet much of what is written here will be appropriate to someone grieving for the loss of a child, sister, brother, close friend or parent.

CHAPTER ONE

The listening ear

When Nick died we lived in London. We had a terraced house on a lovely quiet street with great neighbours. I had local friends, mostly made through the girls' nursery, and a couple of friends from my ante-natal class. My parents were in Edinburgh, where I'd grown up. My sister was in Scotland at the time but moved to New Zealand eight months later. Nick's parents were 100 miles away, his sister and brother both outside London. None were near enough for last minute babysitting or emergency hugs so it was down to my friends to keep me going on a day to day basis.

They have been truly amazing over the last few years. Between them they have made me laugh, cry and helped me reach the bottom of many bottles of wine. One neighbour appeared instantly several times when I phoned in a panic, another regularly helped look after one or both of the girls. Parents of my children's friends have done way more than their fair share of fetching, carrying and looking after, and to them I will be eternally grateful.

When someone dies, their death doesn't only affect the immediate family. It can have an unsettling effect on the lives and relationships of friends, colleagues and neighbours too. A death is like a pebble being thrown into water – creating a dramatic splash and then being followed by ripples that continue to spread outwards.

Looking back on the last few years, one of the things that has most



surprised me is the way Nick's death affected so many of my friendships. I didn't realise it would happen and the result has been, at times, quite hard for many of us to cope with.

Many friendships have deepened and wonderful new relationships have grown. Others have been tested by years of grief and a few have simply died, as friendships do over time under any circumstances.

The friends of someone who is bereaved fall into different categories:

- There are the new friends who didn't know your partner. They are great for helping you move on with your life, discovering new interests, making new attachments and growing as a person.
- There are the couples you used to socialise with together. Being with them can be comforting and reassuring, but can also be hard as you watch two people live and grow together in a way you never will.
- Then there are the married friends who aren't getting on very well, which is hard because you just want to shake them and say 'can't you realise how lucky you are to have each other?' – not always appropriate and not the best way to behave.
- There are divorced friends who have experienced many of the same feelings of loss so can be very empathetic, but who don't understand what it feels like to lose a partner when you both still loved each other.
- Then there are single friends who can be great company though a widowed person may not see themselves as single, but rather still married to someone who isn't there any more.

Watching a friend grieve for the loss of a much loved partner is a tall order. It's exhausting, relentless, difficult and at times boring to listen to the same things over and over. Your friend will require much patience and understanding, and the support you offer soon after the death will be different to the support they need later on.

This chapter deals with how you can support your friend in the immediate aftermath of their partner dying, and the weeks that follow.

There are many things you can do to help, whether you are local or live far away.

- Talk about their partner, and carry on doing so. Don't think you'll upset them – they are already more upset than you could imagine. Talking about the bereaved person makes it clear that they may have died but they haven't been forgotten, it is a way of recognising that you knew that person and it shows the bereaved that you still remember and think about their partner.
- Call and tell them you've been thinking about their husband or wife, recount a dream or a memory you've experienced. We all like talking about our friends and family when they're alive – well it's still the same when they're dead, if not more so.
- Phone regularly and keep it up for as long as you can after the death. By staying in very close contact you will be more aware of your friend's ups and downs. You'll know when they're struggling and likewise you'll hear when they're doing better and you can recognise that progress and encourage them. By phoning once every few months you may get a very skewed view of how they're really coping.



- Keep your calls short and phone when you know it's a good time. If you don't know when is a good time, then ask. Maybe your friend can't sleep and is awake late into the night and would appreciate someone to talk to. Maybe they're up at 5am with insomnia. Maybe when her husband would have normally come in from playing golf or football. When the kids have just gone to school and they come back to an empty house and the loneliness hits home extra hard. Or perhaps on a Sunday morning when they've got a long day ahead of them alone.
- A quick, regular call just to say you know they're there and you're thinking about them can make a big difference to a day.
- If your mother or father has recently been widowed, try and ring often, even if only for a few minutes. Older bereaved people will be nervous of being a burden on their grown-up children and may not contact them as often as they want to for fear of getting in the way or being a nuisance.
- Don't expect your widowed mother suddenly to want to babysit your children all the time. Yes, she may seem lonely, but she'd probably rather have your company than that of grandchildren who will require energy and stamina she doesn't have just now.
- If you see something your friend or parent might enjoy – an exhibition, a film, concert or sports match, suggest you go together. They won't want to go alone.
- Don't be offended if your friend doesn't reply to your calls – it can be hard work phoning people back and going over how things are, particularly if they're feeling low. Your friend

might have the answerphone on, but they will still appreciate knowing you've rung up because you care.

- Don't try and get them to 'look on the bright side' or 'think positively'. Many bereaved people experience some form of depression – some more acutely than others – and they won't be able to see positive things that are happening at first.
- Keep an eye out for depression. If your friend is having trouble sleeping, is tired, irritable, low spirited, not eating properly then the chances are they are depressed and should seek some help. There is more information at the end of this book.
- Encourage your friend to talk to people who have been through a similar experience. Most hospices run support or friendship groups for relatives, there are organisations for people bereaved through suicide and road traffic accidents and several widowed people's organisations for younger and older widows. They will find people who have a clearer understanding of what they are going through and who they can socialise with. The White Ladder Press website has a full list of such groups (www.whiteladderpress.com).
- If a man is suddenly bringing up children alone, getting out to play sport, or go for a drink is going to be difficult. Once in a while ring up and suggest you have a beer at his house or watch a match there, rather than meeting in the pub and leaving him at home babysitting on his own. Not quite the same atmosphere but he'll appreciate the company. Better still, organise a babysitter for him so he can get out and join you.
- If you are in a couple, be aware that it might be hard for your friend to see you together, at least for a while. Think about seeing your friend separately as well, rather than always