



Grief in isolation **by Mary Hartley**

After 16 years I'd been coping pretty well with my grief; it never goes away but it's been a lot gentler and easier and my day to day life has been good. I'd say I'm generally a happy and upbeat sort of person. What I hadn't realised was just how much being busy, getting out and about, meeting up with lots of people for meals and outings, travelling, going to London to run the library and looking after my granddaughters, was enabling me to cope with my grief for Claire. Even though I'm retired now my diary tends to

be full and I don't have many days without somewhere I need to be or something I need to do. Until the lockdown! Now I'm home alone, only connecting with people by phone or Email or facetime, with loads of time to fill and I've had to think again about how I can possibly survive with a Claire-shaped hole in my heart. I have to admit I really struggled during the first couple of weeks, and became pretty depressed, but I've worked through that and am in a much better place now. This was Claire's last home so everything reminds me of her, as though I need reminding, and maybe that's why I usually spend so much time out of the house. Now though I'm looking at her things, spending time connecting with her, thinking about her, looking at photos and I'm almost at the point where I can watch the DVDs of her that I've not been able to face in more than 16 years. In a way it's sort of 'wallowing in grief' but I really need to allow myself to do that, because I never have before, or at least not since the first few months, and I've lost some of my most precious memories along the way, lost a part of my girl that I needn't have lost. It makes me cry, I'm crying while I'm typing this, but I've needed to do that too. The reward is that wonderful memories are coming back, I feel so much closer to Claire, I can feel her presence around the house and I'm dreaming about her a lot.

One of the things that is helping me is 'mindfulness'. I'd heard about this but didn't really get it-too busy being busy I expect! Recently though my local church, which is pulling out all the stops to support us, started giving us on-line coaching in being in the moment and I'm surprised at how calming and relaxing that can be, especially when I'm sitting in Claire's bedroom with a candle alight. I've just had a look at you-tube and there are lots of sessions on there if anyone would like to try it. Reading a lot is helping me too, murder mysteries mostly but also some old favourites I've been meaning to re-read for ages. I did think about reading some 'improving' books but that's not what I need right now; I need the equivalent of junk food and have forced myself to put away any guilt I might have, and would usually have, about sitting around reading when I could be 'doing' something. A good place to sit around reading is the garden and being outside boosts my mood such a lot. Keeping in touch with friends and family is helping too. I'm not overly keen on the term 'social distancing' and much prefer 'physical distancing'. I spend hours on the phone every day and a lot of time on line. I look at the TCF facebook page several times a day and feel so connected to other parents; I love the way we all understand each other without any explanations being needed. I'm also writing quite a few letters and snail mail is great for staying in touch. The final thing I'll mention is my radio, which I recently bought in Sainsbury's. I have it permanently tuned to Classic FM and I find the music is soothing my soul. I'm staying away from the news as much as I can because that has the opposite effect. Everyone's talking about the 'new normal' but not many of them have the expertise we have to deal with that. One day at a time, and don't forget to breathe, is what has got me through the worst days of my life and that's how my mind is functioning now.

With love and empathy from *Mary Hartley* x