



Grief in Isolation **by Claire Hammond**

Working as a full-time teaching assistant in a primary school, I can honestly say that when news of schools closing came due to the pandemic, I was relieved. Not only for the safety of everybody in school, but also for my own sanity.

On May 18th 2019, I received the devastating news from a police visit, that my beautiful eighteen year old daughter, Rhiannon, had accidentally overdosed on a mixture of cocaine and morphine after a night drinking vodka with her boyfriend. It was a very surreal time looking back, like something you see on the TV but never expect to actually happen. My husband Paul (Rhiannon's step-father) and I were escorted by the police to the hospital, where Rhiannon was born, to formally identify her. It is an image that will live with me forever. We were told that, because of her age and suspicion of drug use, there would be an inquest.

Two days after Rhiannon died, Paul encouraged me to start planning for her funeral. Strangely, it gave me focus. After the funeral director left, we walked over to our local pub to enquire about the wake. It was then that I received a phone-call from my mother informing me that my elderly father had been rushed to hospital with breathing difficulties. I accompanied her to the hospital where we were told that he had pneumonia and sepsis. He was moved onto the palliative care ward to receive end of life care. As a (broken) family, we kept a vigil at his bedside until he slipped peacefully away exactly one week after his granddaughter. In one week, I had lost my darling daughter and my fabulous Dad.

Looking back, I can't believe how we all got through those early days, weeks and months. I returned to work in September and had the full support from my fabulous work friends. The routine of work was a good distraction and made me feel useful again. Though some days, I was sobbing before I got into my car at the end of the school day.

It took six months for the toxicology report to come back, which felt like forever and was an agonising wait. A month later, two weeks before Christmas, the inquest was held. Something I was absolutely dreading. Then we had the first Christmas. Both sets of ashes sat on my fireplace giving some small comfort that, as much as they could be, they were still with us. New Year was an emotional time followed by both of their January birthdays.

Bizarrely, their birthdays were a week apart and they died a week apart. Rhiannon's birthday hit me really hard and I hit rock-bottom. Since she died in May, there was always a focus. It suddenly hit me that, 'This is it then, I've just got to carry on now without you'.

Leading up to the inquest, I had received six sessions of grief counselling from Cruse, who were amazing. I quickly realised that I needed help again because I felt that I was sinking lower and lower. It wasn't unusual to go to bed secretly hoping that, like my daughter, I wouldn't wake up in the morning. This time, I found help from a local NHS service offering a grief therapist. I have recently completed my course of therapy which has been really beneficial and has focused a lot on the anger that I was holding onto. The last few sessions, due to Covid-19, were via telephone call with my therapist. Everyone is different, but for me, counselling and therapy has really helped me cope with my grief. The Compassionate Friends Facebook page and forum has also been an incredible support to me and I don't feel alone in my grief, knowing that there are so many of us bereaved parents out there. It's not a club anyone wants to join but we are always there for each other. Quite simply, it makes me feel that whatever I'm feeling/experiencing, is completely normal.

Lockdown has finally given me the time to process everything that has happened and made me realise how far I have come from that awful, life-changing day in May last year. I am currently studying an online course to further my career within school. This is keeping me busy throughout the day and giving me a routine to stick to. However, if I wake up and don't feel like studying, I am learning to be kind to myself in isolation and give myself some time-off. I might have a soak in the bath or put a face mask on and just let my mind wander. I am accepting that I'm going to have 'off-days' and this is the new normal. I really feel like I needed the time (that lockdown has provided) to put myself first and look after my emotional wellbeing.

Something that I have noticed, during the current situation, is that I have started to appreciate nature again. At the bottom of the garden, I have watched a bare oak tree bloom an abundance of new leaves. Simple pleasures

like sipping my morning coffee whilst feeling the warmth of the sunshine on my face are something I now have time for. I am also enjoying regular visits from a pair of robins, which bring comfort and never fail to make me smile. I feel that I am also having happier thoughts of Rhiannon – memories of childhood rather than the anger that I had been experiencing. Whilst the pandemic is obviously a very worrying time, I feel the time off that it has provided, has been positive in my situation. I also feel strangely calm about the whole situation as I think, when the worst thing that can happen HAS happened, there's not much else to fear.

Claire Hammond