

The grief does not go away. How I live with the loss of my adult son

The tragic death of Andrew Lloyd Webber's son brought back painful memories for psychologist Linda Blair. She describes her own experience



Linda Blair, above and left with her son Jonathan in 1999: "Acceptance, even though unwanted, is the only outcome".

SAM JONES

Linda Blair

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“**A**ndrew Lloyd Webber's eldest son, Nicholas, dies of gastric cancer aged 43.” When I read that headline last weekend, everything around me disappeared and my mind went numb. And then the pain returned. A pain like no other I have ever known — one that sits somewhere just under the heart, buried deep, and one which is inconsolable and incurable.

My first reaction was to think how unbearable the loss of Nicholas must feel for his family. But then — selfishly, it seemed to me — more thoughts followed. My own memories from 2019, sitting in ICU with my eldest son, Jonathan, hope draining away. He died of multiple organ failure brought on by cystic fibrosis. Had he lived he would be 40 now, three years younger than Lloyd Webber's son.

After forcing myself back to the present, I remember thinking, “Oh stop it.” But then I realised that parents who lose a child at any age can't “stop it” or get over it, because grief doesn't work that way. You don't “get through it”. You learn to live with it. Acceptance, even though unwanted, is the only outcome.

Parents who lose adult children are often overlooked in the conversations around grief. In recent years the taboo surrounding miscarriage and stillbirth and child bereavement has lifted, thankfully, so we know more about the heartbreak that follows, and are therefore better prepared to help parents cope with it. But the pain of losing a child never stops, even when that child is grown up.

No one who loses a child is saved from experiencing the most devastating grief, because somehow it shouldn't happen. We shouldn't lose our children. Losing a parent is devastating of course, but it feels like the natural order of things. My mother is a few months short of 100, and I know that makes me very lucky, but to outlive your grandchild doesn't feel right to her either.

Nor can wealth protect you, and sadly, Lloyd Webber's fortune can't shield him from his family's pain. My professional training didn't help with my grief either, as I'd hoped it might. I'm a chartered clinical psychologist, and I have more than 40 years of experience helping families to work through crises, but nothing in my training afforded me protection.

Therefore, in tribute to my son Jonathan and to Nicholas Lloyd Webber, I offer my observations for those who have endured the death of their child. I use the term “child”, because that's what our offspring are to us parents, no matter how old they

are. I expect these observations can apply whatever the age of the child you lose, although I can only speak from the experience of losing an adult child.



Andrew Lloyd Webber and his son Nicholas in 1989

ALAN DAVIDSON/SHUTTERSTOCK

I have written a lot about coping with grief but this is the first time I speak from personal experience, rather than from my professional base. What professionals are taught about grief can only serve as general guidelines, because every loss is unique. If what I write seems even somewhat close to your own experience, perhaps it will help you to feel a bit less alone.

My first observation is that it doesn't lessen the pain if you're "prepared" for their death (this goes for any loss). It doesn't matter whether it's a sudden, unexpected death — although the shock may last longer in those cases — or one that comes after months or even years of sitting by the bedside of a loved one. All losses of a child are equally devastating, because in each case it's the worst pain that any parent could ever imagine.

Second, you won't know how long it will be before you can trust yourself to function publicly again — and sadly, no one else can tell you either, not even an expert like me, I'm afraid. You'll only know the worst is over once you get there.

I remember when, a year after my son died — the amount of time I'd read that society traditionally “allows” for grieving — I became frightened because I still felt unable to trust my emotional stability. Sudden tears could still overwhelm me unexpectedly. Anxiously, I sought the advice of a wise older friend. “Stability returns slowly,” she counselled. “Then sometime later, you'll notice it was several days before you felt overwhelmed again. One day, you'll wake up and realise you haven't cried for a whole day. And eventually, you'll just . . . know.” For me, it took nearly two and a half years, but at last a day came when — as my friend had predicted — I just knew.

Being with others can be a huge comfort when you're grieving, but only if they don't try to console you their way. Their caring presence is what you need, and their quiet attention if you wish to speak. A grieving parent benefits much more from non-judgmental acceptance of your occasional unexpected behaviour than from unsolicited advice.

My partner was unparalleled in this way. I look back on times when I abruptly left a restaurant mid-meal because someone who sounded like Jonathan laughed, or when I walked out of a play when someone in the story died, and I wonder how he did it. He would just pay any bills and quietly leave as well, joining me with no questions asked.

Another observation — and this is not just from my own experience but from accounts of others as well — is that it's not unusual, maybe even common, to talk to your dead child. I often find myself telling Jonathan about something I know would make him laugh, or that reminds me of an experience we once shared. To me, this is comforting.

Doing good for others is also hugely healing. Humans are social beings; that's why altruism is always high on the list of what makes people happy. Those in the caring professions are lucky because they help others in obvious ways. But others can inspire a sense of wellbeing too, by creating a painting, singing, repairing a much-needed item, helping someone to plant their garden. Even just offering a genuine compliment can bring a smile and a sense of pride to another individual. In fact, anything we do, if we think how it can be helpful or useful to others, will serve. Adopting this attitude can reignite the sense of worth and purpose you may feel you'd lost.

Finally, if at last there come moments when you suddenly realise you've forgotten your loss briefly, that for just a little while you felt carefree, please don't feel guilty. Instead, enjoy the brief release. Your child would no doubt be glad to see you smile. Please allow them their generosity.

Christina Rossetti, the 19th-century English writer and children's poet, expressed this sentiment much more eloquently than I ever can, so I will end this piece with words from *Remember*, her sonnet in which she describes how she hopes to be remembered after her death:

*Yet if you should forget me for a while
And afterwards remember, do not grieve:
For if the darkness and corruption leave
A vestige of the thoughts that once I had,
Better by far you should forget and smile
Than that you should remember and be sad.*