

Thoughts from the Chair

Dear Compassionate Friends

And so it has arrived again. The winter, the festivities that come with it, the hustle and bustle that accompanies this time of year; and all I want to do is hide under a duvet. You too? Yes, I thought so.

While the rest of the world appears to be getting ready for “the most wonderful time of the year” we are bracing ourselves for the grief triggers to hit us and developing our coping strategies. What is it for you? I've ordered more wool than is seemly and will be knee deep in crochet projects for the duration.

The most common advice we hear is “Be kind to yourself. Do what feels right for you”. This, on the face of it, sounds like good advice, but how do you balance the conflicting needs and expectations of your family and friends with your own at such a complicated time of year? Or do you just escape? Is there any escape? In the second year, I was at the hairdressers and the topic, inevitably turned to the Christmas plans. I said that I would like to escape the whole thing if that were possible but I couldn't see how. Bless her, while my hair was being treated, the kindly girl went off to her phone and googled “escape from Christmas” and came back, very pleased to give me a list of places that I could go where Christmas wasn't celebrated. “I'll come with you if you like”, she said. Her kindness and thoughtfulness touched me. Of course, there is no escape really is there. All we can do is navigate it as best we can.

I was contemplating whether I could give any realistic advice on the things that people are troubled by the most at this time of year. Do you accept that kindly meant invitation? Do you make a polite



Maria and her son James

excuse and decline? Do you satisfy the needs of those around you at the cost of your own? Do you stick to old traditions or do you do it completely differently? Cards or no cards? How do you sign them. Do you include your child's name or not?

The perplexities are endless and sorry, but this next paragraph doesn't contain the answers to those questions. We all do it differently and we may change our minds from year to year. One year, you may feel more robust and find that you can cook a big meal and have a family day of sorts. Another year you may not be able to face it and retreat to your own space for a while. It is, quite literally, a movable feast.

The important thing to remember is that it doesn't matter. There are no rules. In the bigger picture, the only thing that matters, surely, is that we find a coping strategy that gets each of us through this time and out the other side. Most of us have done it before and will do it again.

But what advice would I give those for whom this is the first time? I remember my first Christmas. The pain was tangible

and I found that I could barely breathe. I hadn't yet found The Compassionate Friends and looking back on it, (what I can remember for it is a bit of a blur really) I was quite literally lost. I remember thinking that I should try. That people would expect things from me. So I did. I went to a shopping centre and broke down sobbing in a department store. I might not remember much about that first Christmas, but I certainly remember the assistant trying to help me in that shop and how painful the whole experience was for me and must have been for her too. Why did I put myself through it? To comply. That can be the only explanation for what I was doing. Placing myself in a busy shopping centre buying gifts for people when all I wanted to do was scream. Why? Who needed a gift that badly for pity's sake? But, I wanted to be what everyone expected me to be and I was hurting myself in the process. I still can't explain why I thought I could achieve such a mammoth task. I guess it was because I didn't give myself the freedom to "do what's right for me". I didn't give myself permission to "do it differently" and I certainly wasn't "being gentle on myself" because no-one had told me I could or should.

I resolved then that things needed to be put into perspective. That I needed to find a way to balance the needs of others against my needs and to be proportionate. That's one piece of advice.

The other is the one I live by the most. Don't be quick to take offence. Remember, the non- bereaved speak a different language to us and a lot of what they say can get lost in translation. They also don't have the same knowledge as we do so they don't really know what to do for the best. So, for what it's worth, my advice is to take deep breaths and shrug your shoulders. I'll give you an example.

We used to get hundreds of Christmas cards before. Then, the year that James died we got 6; one of those said "chin up" and another said "we hope that you are feeling better now". As if we were recovering from a cold! It really isn't worth getting upset about these things. People need educating, yes of course. That is why the work we do here at The Compassionate Friends is so important. We can inform people but of course what they do with that information is really a matter for them. As for us, the bereaved? Well we have enough to cope with without worrying about some Victorian traditions and how people apply them to us in our fractured world. Breathe, and shrug your shoulders.

Above all, hold on. We are all in this together and we will get through it together. The Facebook groups and Forum are good places for support and the Helpline stays open even on Christmas Day thanks to the dedication and commitment of our army of volunteers. If you need us, we are here for you.

Lastly, and most importantly, find some space for you. Allow yourself to lean into the grief, the missing and the longing for your child. Honour them and keep them close. We don't need to pretend. Who are we pretending for? The memories of Christmas past may sustain you in Christmas present. Let them come crashing in and allow yourself a smile remembering those happy times. We need them.

One moment, one breath, one memory at a time.

I hope that the coming weeks are gentle on you all and I send you my sincerest wishes for a peaceful Christmas holiday season.

Maria (James's mum)