



The New Normal. Where have we heard that before?

It's funny how people adopt phrases as if they are new and original isn't it. People keep talking about the New Normal as if it is an original concept. They've hi-jacked our vocabulary! And our feelings! Have you noticed the parallels between the situation that the world is living in currently, and

the world that you and I have been occupying for some time? Grief?

One event, accident, incident, call it what you will, has sent ripples to every corner of the world. We've been there, done it and got the medal. The rest of the world is just playing catch up in my view. We keep asking for answers. Why? Whose fault is it that this happened? Could it have been prevented? How will we survive something so huge? Will we heal? Familiar phrases right? But ultimately the answers to those questions are elusive and we have no clarity. We just know that we are here and we have to find a way to deal with it and survive.

So how are we coping? Generally, collectively, how is the world dealing with the normal that is for them now apparently so 'new'? Can we, as bereaved parents draw on our own experiences to show the non-bereaved how to adapt?

Listen. I know that everybody's lockdown experience is different. Like grief. I also know that everyone is handling this in their own way. Like grief. It's a subjective matter and it really depends on who we were before. What our life experience was, who is in our support team, our coping strategies and a host of other factors. Like grief.

And it's not rigid is it? It's fluid and varied. One minute you are full of beans and clearing out that cupboard, wondering why you still have baking powder from 2012, then you find yourself sitting staring at that baking powder and realising that this silly little mundane item that you have been staring at for the last 30 minutes, was in the house "before". The thought that I had probably had this out when James and I were making some silly cake together throws me into another dimension and suddenly this inanimate and out-of-date object becomes a precious relic from a beautiful past. The old normal. There was nothing wrong with the old normal. Happy times lived in colour and when this silly little item should have been thrown in the bin long since, but now finds its way wiped down and put neatly back in the newly lined cupboard because it represents a different time. The old normal which required no newness and no updating.

Let's talk about triggers. Undoubtedly this situation is throwing us back to before our child died and also to that terrible, raw experience of early grief so I just wanted to write my thoughts on this experience. My views are not all encompassing and not everyone will agree

with me when I say this, but personally, I think that the comparison has helped me to deal with the current situation and helped me to sustain my hard fought for equilibrium.

When James died, I retreated into my own world and didn't want to speak with anyone. On the rare occasions when I was persuaded to venture out, I was extremely uncomfortable and couldn't wait to return to my "cave" as I called it. I didn't like the world without James in it and I couldn't understand why the world was happy to continue in its own merry way without the vibrancy that is my son. I just wanted to scream out loud, "Stop! Just Stop. Do you all not understand the enormity of what has happened!?" I imagined the world perfectly still with empty streets and unused roads and I wanted it to be that way. Now I see the pictures of the quiet, still world and honestly....? My first thought was, "At last. The world has caught up with me. At last you can all grieve him with me." I wondered whether I was turning into a narcissist but that's what grief does to you sometimes isn't it? It's so overwhelming that you can't see beyond what you are struggling with. At one point, while reflecting on all of this, I even wondered, fleetingly, whether I had willed this strange situation and made it happen so that everyone can finally understand what we go through every day!

So why was I so desperate for the world to stop? Well, I wanted my grief to be acknowledged I guess. I wanted everyone to catch their breath at the enormity of his absence. And since the world was not going to stop, I did. I retreated into my cave and stopped. Now when I take a walk in the quiet neighbourhood I say to myself, "this is how it should be. I'm comfortable here".

We are all making adjustments in order to adapt to our current situation. But how often have you heard me say this? Acclimatisation is key. We bereaved families know this. We have made the biggest and hugest adjustment any human should be expected to make. Please don't tell me that this situation is a "nightmare" or "the end of the world" or "unbearable" or that you are "bored" or missing your grandchildren etc, etc, etc. No actually that's unfair of me. Ok, you can tell me that because I'm a compassionate person and empathetic and I have learned how to see things from your perspective. So ok, I take that back. Ok, my dear non-bereaved friend, I'm prepared to listen to your view of this situation and how it is affecting you and I love you very much so please believe me when I say this, that I say it with kindness. You have no idea mate. You can Skype your child. You can look forward to a time when you will hug her again or kiss him again or hear their stories but we don't have that to look forward to. So, forgive me if I just smile and nod my head in acquiescence for your version of this grief but I'm entitled to say, mine trumps yours. You'll be able to tell your grandchildren about this period in history and about the clapping and the loo rolls and the pasta shortage. I won't. I desperately wish that I could share this experience with my boy and while I play over in my head how much fun it would have been with him in the house to drive me crazy, let's take a breath and apply some realism to your situation. Am I being too harsh? Maybe, but let's be honest, isn't that what many of us are thinking?

The grief parallels

Isolation, introspection, preservation, survival. An alien situation. These are not new concepts for us. Spending time talking to people who are not physically in the same room as we are? Ok, there's a difference between Skype and having conversations in your head with your child who isn't physically here, I get that; but as you know, I chat to James often so I'm used to this unusual state of affairs in a way.

The world has shrunk

It actually did for us, didn't it? But now it has for everyone. The things we wanted, needed or desired before, just aren't that important anymore. We have gone back to raw basics and core values I think. Smaller groups of friends. New ones even. An adjustment to the situation making your next door neighbour more than the person who lives in the house next to yours but has become a friend; the person who just called you because she is out of sugar and can't get to the shops; the person you make a point of meeting every morning at the garden fence for a catch up. Different to before. For me, this is similar to my grief experience. Whether you are sharing your home, or your neighbourhood, or your grief, or your time; we are forming communities. It's almost tribal and it is smaller than it was. Just like The Compassionate Friends did for me, new people took their place in my "team" and strangers became friends because "we are all in this together".

Loss of physical connection

This is a big thing for people and for me, I suppose, if I let it, it would be one of those things that trigger my grief wave the most. The constant talk of missing hugs and kisses. It's hard on the poor muggles... as I call the non-bereaved.... isn't it? Well, welcome to our world guys. I've not hugged my James for 6 years so welcome to the club. Am I being harsh again?

Missing our old habits

Well, we can all write a book about that one can't we? While everyone else is missing the pub and their holiday on the beach, we have much more to speak about.

The mask

Hey world, I have a whole box of them here if you want them. The happy face, the interested face, you name it, I have it. They're not the kind of mask that you are all talking about guys but, you want to talk about masks, it's all right here. I've been wearing one for 6 years now. It doesn't provide the protection you all think it does.

So how do we cope with all of this?

The triggers, the throwback, the time to dwell on our loss; the list is endless and I could talk about this for the rest of lockdown. Don't worry, I won't. But here are my top tips with the obvious disclaimer. This is what works *for me*. I'm not an expert *on grief*. I'm an expert on *my grief* and here are some ideas.

Humour

Those of you who know me, will know that I like to laugh. James and I laughed through life and though there was a while when I never thought that I would laugh again, I have learned to and I enjoy it. Try it. Shrug your shoulders at some irritations maybe? Emotions are bound to be high at the moment so forgive. Yourself and others. So what if a well meaning friend makes a comment that might be considered thoughtless? Is it something that you can let pass? We can't change the way other people see things. We just can't. Everyone is different and everyone has their own experience and strength to draw on. Don't let negativity stifle your smile and your humour. It's difficult to be angry when you smile sincerely and it feels better to approach hard situations with a positive intent. It won't always work but if you get the ratio right, you will find a balance.

Cry

Conversely, cry if you want to. It's ok. Why not? Sometimes, holding back sadness and grief causes tension which in turn can be harmful. Let it go. Release those emotions. I don't know

why we stifle tears as much as we do. In my view they are a healthy reaction to emotion and I always feel cleansed after a good cry.

Try to let go of Anger

Anger is a heavy emotion and will stifle other things. Reason, perspective, good humour all get stifled by anger and like empty calories, it is a wasted emotion that serves no useful purpose. I get angry. I get angry lots but at silly things and it is fleeting. Be aware of this emotion. Acknowledge it and see if you can park it somewhere where you won't trip over it.

Tolerance

When we are living in a constrained and alien environment perhaps we expect people to be more patient with us. We are finding our feet and we are in a stressful situation. I've been hoping that people will be more tolerant and patient with me for 6 years now so I think it's time that I placed that in my armoury too. I'm not sure that I'm very good at it but I'm practising and I'm hoping that by the end of this I'll have mellowed a bit more. We'll see. I do think though that adding a bit of tolerance to the formula will ease things along a bit and that it fights off the tendency to react in anger. It's a process I guess. And while we're on the subject, how about a bit of patience with ourselves too? And a little sprinkling of self awareness and reflection. I've come to the conclusion that I need to be more accepting of myself and a bit more realistic. So I'm able to say that it isn't the lack of time that prevents me going back to playing the piano. Nor, indeed, is it the lack of a piano. I just don't want to. I enjoy sitting on my sofa, knitting and eating the occasional box of chocolates or two. There. I've said it. Please don't judge me, but if you do, I'll take it. I'm no longer kidding myself or anyone else. See? It's quite cathartic.

Breathe

I always feel like I'm stating the bleeding obvious when I say this. But it's true. We don't breathe half as deeply as we should. Ironic I think, that at a time when we are all fighting a respiratory disease that I should be reminding the bereaved to breathe. There are scientific reasons why deep breathing is beneficial. Oxygen to the brain will help release positive endorphines... or something like that. I don't really know the science stuff but you get my drift. More than that though, deep breaths give you time to reflect. It might help dispel negativity. It's worth a try.

Exercise and activity

Ok, I'm fully prepared for those of you who know me to giggle at this one. The last person in the world who would be talking about the benefits of exercise right? Listen guys, like you, I know the theory and I know it's good for you. Let's just leave it at "do as I say and not as I do" and I'll wait for the clever comments in response. We're all fallible remember and we all have our own ways and this is a prime example of acknowledging that. Come on, let's all go for a walk or do the Joe Wicks workout or something but let's pass the time and release some of those endorphine things that I was talking about earlier. I will if you will.

This may be the time to try some yoga and meditation. Those that practice it will tell you about the benefits of stillness and silence for general wellbeing. Really, we have time to try it now. What do we have to lose?

Crafting

My personal favourite. It's good for you for a host of reasons. It stills the mind and repetitive activity is hugely beneficial to mental well being. Find a practical way to push back.

Something repetitive helps stimulate the healing part of the brain. While you are distracted in your repetitive activity, the brain is unblocking toxins and will release the stress. I'm a knit and crochet person. More crochet these days. In fact, I learned to crochet during my "in the cave" days and it has stood me well in the lockdown days too. You can order some yarn and needles from Amazon or Ebay, go on YouTube and away you go. There are plenty of bereaved parents who do it and who will help you out if you get stuck. There are bereaved parents craft groups on Facebook and if you can't find one that you like then start one of your own or phone a friend.

Lots of people are turning to DIY. This is not really for me but as above, what do you have to lose? Oh, maybe a thumb. Be careful.

Ok, Social Media

Tricky one this one. Like marmite. Love it or hate it. I wasn't on Facebook before James died but I joined it soon after and it has been my lifeline. I have met some incredible people through Facebook groups set up by TCF who I now consider close friends. I know that there is a debate about the benefits of social media versus the negatives but for me it works. And I believe that, like everything, the key is in how you use it. It's a tool. Use it wisely and to your advantage and it will be positive. If you practice the tips above, 'humour' 'deep breaths' and 'no anger allowed' you will benefit from the experience. If you feel that you get angry and might be getting offended too often by what you are reading, maybe give it a break for a bit. It's all a matter of practice and moderation. Adjustment and acclimatisation.

Talk to people....or not

I mean, really just do whatever you want. We have time at the moment. If you want to jump in to that family Zoom call with great Aunt Doris in New Zealand (even if it's just to see who she is because you really didn't know that you had a great Aunt Doris in NZ), then fine. But if today is the day when you couldn't give a flying fig about whether you had 15 great aunts all scattered around the globe, then don't! It doesn't matter. Do what you want to do and don't let yourself be forced into anything. This is your grief, sorry, I mean lockdown experience.

Guilt

A good time to deal with this topic. We are not all going to come out of this as Master Bakers playing the violin and speaking Mandarin having read all the classics and learned to play chess. Ok. It's not going to happen. Some days, just getting through the day is good enough. Remember to be ***your best***, not ***the best***. Just be yourself and don't worry about what other people are doing. They have different skills, strengths, weaknesses and issues. You just be you and the rest will follow.

Isolation does not mean alone

The two are not the same. Being isolated physically does not mean that you are alone. In this community, you are never alone. One of the things I first noticed about bereaved friends is how quickly we gel. We have a bond that transcends all others and I am passionate about it. No-one is alone in our community. Conversely, you can be isolated in a crowded room. Look out for your wellbeing. We are not expected to be super heroes. We do not have to be "strong" "fighters" "courageous" or any other thing that we are not. Give support to others. That's the easy bit. But ask for support too. Why is that harder? Say that you need help and give someone else the chance to be your hero. It's fine. We all take it in turns to support and

be supported. Like the chain of elephants that I am often heard talking about. Trunk to tail we are stronger than the individual. Maybe you can see yourself as a part of that chain.

There are lots of other things that we can tap into. Read, watch tv, phone a friend for a long chat over coffee, write letters...remember them? Anything that gives you sense of peace and some tranquility and that will help you get from one hour into the next. One breath at a time. There you go, another phrase that you have heard before.

What next?

So what will life look like when we step outside? Can anything be normal again? Well, I guess we will have to approach it like we did before. Small steps. Gradually. No, it won't be "normal", it will be different. We will acclimatise to the changes though. We know that we can because we already have.

So do I have the tools to cope with this situation because James died, or in spite of it? I don't know the answer to that. I just know that personally, my lockdown experience hasn't been that bad. I've learned a lot about myself and about the tools that I have in my armoury and I think that we, bereaved parents, can teach the world a great deal from what we have learned. I suspect that this time, I won't be cajoled out of my cave too easily and I might just want to stay here. Actually, James and I could be quite hermetic when we chose to be. For all his cool and expansive social life, James liked nothing more than to make excuses to duck out of a planned night with his friends and stay at home instead, with his mama, eating pizza and binge watching a series on the tv. Oh yes. We were ahead of the times my boy and I.

Maybe I now consider myself more an 'extrovert hermit'. Why not? After all, this grief life is a host of contradictions and there's another one for you. Loud, sociable, enjoying people's company immensely but perfectly happy in my own world where I continue to have conversations with my son out loud without people wondering what on Earth is going in in my head. I've used this time to imagine James' response to this crisis and what he would be doing. I've got time to spend with him and get to know my 27 year old hero now. New relationships and strengthened old ones.

I hope that I've given you some food for thought. Please, this is not an instruction manual. These are just ideas, and as I hope I've indicated, not all of them work for me either. There's lots more to discuss and lots of ways to do things. So keep talking, keep listening, be kind and as we now say, stay safe.

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