

TALKING GRIEF WITH...

Poorna Bell

Death is one of life's inevitables, perhaps the only one. Yet it's the topic so often shied away from, as award-winning journalist and author Poorna Bell knows only too well. She talks to Emma Winterschladen about navigating the aftermath of a devastating loss, supporting a grieving loved one – particularly over the festive period, and the dreaded 'deathiversaries'.

Life, created daily, every two seconds in fact, is also lost daily – every four seconds. But for something so ubiquitous, death remains a whispered subject, often pushed tentatively to the corner of our conversations and mind. That's not to say there isn't an ever-growing body of literature surrounding death: novels, plays, TV shows and now even podcasts are dedicated to it in all its messy, sad, life-affirming grittiness. But day-to-day, most of us don't want to have to think about a loved one's demise. The hard, cold fact remains though: we will all experience the loss of someone we love. And even if you are yet to be touched by grief, the chances are you know someone currently in its dark waters.

For Poorna Bell, death came knocking unexpectedly four years ago, when she lost her husband, Rob, to suicide. Poorna has since written *Chase the Rainbow* – a part-memoir, part-journalistic enquiry, which documents the aftermath of Rob's death, and investigates more widely suicide and addiction in men. Her latest memoir, *In Search of Silence*, offers up a more personal and philosophical exploration of life and death. 'I wrote my first book for a very specific purpose: to lift some of

the taboos around suicide and depression, as well as opening up the conversation around addiction, which I felt had become very moralised in the media. But this book is a quieter look at what it means to live a meaningful life.'

No longer in the fresh throes of grief, it's apt that Poorna's writing should take on a more reflective nature. 'When Rob died I was just in a state of raw, debilitating grief, but at some point you come up for air and realise that you are still alive, and you have to live this life you've got – even though the grief is still there.' The book is a testament to just that: the privilege and responsibility of being alive.

It was after deciding to leave her high-powered job as executive editor of HuffPost UK, that Poorna travelled to New Zealand, Nepal and India on what she states was a decisively non-*Eat, Pray, Love*-esque journey. 'I wanted to travel to places that already have a place in my heart, as a way of reconnecting with myself, and Rob too. But I soon realised the questions I was unpicking – my sense of purpose, what makes me feel fulfilled and how I wanted my personal life to look – were things a lot of people are wondering about, whatever their circumstance.'

Photo: Amber Rose Photography



The last taboo

The book is just one facet of her career, in which she continues to write and share candidly about her own journey with grief. ‘It’s a strange thing when your personal experience of loss is made public, and becomes your work, but it feels right and needed.’ That Poorna’s articles on grief illicit such an emotive response from readers shows it’s a conversation many of us want to have, even if we’re not quite sure how. ‘There’s a real hunger to talk about grief, I think. Yes, it’s being spoken about a bit more, but there’s still not enough out there. Even on a personal level, I can tell you people are still hugely awkward about it, particularly how it looks long-term.’

There is a scene in Poorna’s book where she describes a trip to Pashupati, a temple in Nepal that is also home to open-air cremation ceremonies. For many, this image of death in plain sight could be an affronting one – a stark contrast to our so-very-British demonstrations of grief. But for Poorna, it was a healing experience, as she describes in this particular passage: ‘There’s something about death being out in the open, in the same place that people are praying for love, for hope, for babies and for health, that articulates the hugeness and fullness of life in a way that words cannot.’

So can we learn something from the East about death? Poorna pauses, hesitant to grant such a cultural accolade. ‘I do think that Eastern cultures tend to allow more space and open grieving throughout the funeral process, but actually I don’t know if they handle it better after the initial rituals. I think almost globally, humans struggle with the aftermath of death and what it does to those left behind.’

OK not to be OK

That well-chimed sentiment ‘It’s OK not to be OK’ echoes in Poorna’s words – both written and when talking to her. ‘The truth of it is this: there is simply no shortcut to grief, so although I totally resonate with the desire to ignore it and pretend it’s not happening, that just doesn’t work.’ There’s an open-hearted resilience that shines through in Poorna, but it’s something she has had to work at.

‘I think resilience is born the moment when you decide to move forward in a way that doesn’t deny but accepts grief as a part of you. It’s not about fighting it, but cultivating your own sense of self out of it.’ It’s also, she says, intimately linked to vulnerability – that very thing that can feel so scary. ‘You can’t be resilient unless you acknowledge the thing that requires your resilience. And sometimes being able to sit with your sadness and lean into it is the first step in building your life back up in a way that’s positive. But it is a lifelong process.’

It’s this idea of loss over a lifetime that Poorna often comes back to. The notion that grief, rather than shrinking over time, actually weaves itself into

the fabric of our lives. ‘Grief isn’t linear, and in my experience it doesn’t necessarily lessen. I went to a suicide support group after Rob died, because it was a very specific type of bereavement. There was a guy there who lost his brother 19 years ago. I remember thinking, ‘I hope I won’t be like this after all that time!’ because I was just so arrogant about what grief was. I didn’t understand how it worked – I just thought it went away eventually.’

What has she learnt since then? ‘Now I see grief as something you adapt and learn to live with.’ The timeline of grief is, Poorna believes, a fallacy – as are the arbitrary steps to passing through it. ‘We humans like stuff to be chronological. It adds a sense of organisation to what is fundamentally chaotic and out of our control. But grief doesn’t play by the rules and although it changes shape, it certainly doesn’t go away.’

In it for life

It’s this that is worth remembering when someone you know – be it a loved one, a friend, a colleague – has lost someone dear. While fresh grief is the one that often garners the most support, it’s that network of ‘How are you?’ texts, flowers and home-cooked meals that fall by the wayside, particularly in the years after. But grief, no matter how ‘old’, still holds the ability to rear its ugly head at the most unexpected of times. And also expectedly too, as is the case with so-called ‘deathiversaries’.

‘Grief doesn’t play by the rules and although it changes shape, it certainly doesn’t go away’



To the uninitiated, the idea of a deathiversary may seem morbid. But for Poorna, it remains one of the most important days in her year. ‘No matter how much time passes, the anniversary of Rob’s death will always be a dark, emotional day. And I would say that if you are friends with someone who has had a big loss in their lives, however long ago it was, know that on that day they could always do with support and love – be it just a text or even a card. It makes such a difference.’

The same gestures are also appreciated for the festive season. For no matter when in the calendar year a loved one died, Christmas time can, as Poorna says, be ‘a relentless stream of forced festivities’.

Festive grieving

So what can those who are grieving do to protect themselves and navigate the festive period? ‘Make it a priority to carve out time and space for yourself, and perhaps reimagine what the festive period is to you. Allow it to be different from when the person you lost was alive.’ Boundaries are important too, Poorna says. ‘Every time I have decided to ignore the voice in my head saying, “You know what, you’re not up for this Christmas party,” but gone anyway, it’s been disaster for my mental and emotional health. So I really do encourage that if you can’t handle spending concentrated time socialising, don’t!’

And what about those times when you do want to be around others? ‘Choose your people well. I think it’s

important to know who you can talk to if you're suddenly feeling sad and grief-stricken. Don't expect everyone to have the emotional capacity to hold space for you, but equally, managing other people's discomfort around your grief is not your responsibility.'

As for what people can do to offer support to those missing someone important at Christmas time, Poorna has a few suggestions: 'Showing that the person is remembered can mean more than any grand gestures. Just playing a song you know they liked, or telling a story. Also, allowing someone who is grieving the opportunity to talk about a loved one can be a real gift. I think it's important to bring the lost person into the day. A lot of pain comes from a feeling that your person and your grief is not being seen amid the celebrations.' Sometimes too, Poorna says, it's the quieter, thoughtful acts of kindness that can mean the most. 'My sister did something that was so kind and sweet last year. Rob always cooked Christmas dinner, and so she cooked the exact meal he would have cooked if he was here. I didn't ask her to do that, but it meant so much and it meant he was there with us all.'

A weight lifted

There's a metaphor that's long done the rounds in the grief community that describes how the loss of a loved one is a hole that remains the same size, but is filled, over time, with the rest of your life – the things and people you love. This resonates with Poorna. 'Yes, that's right. Time in itself doesn't necessarily heal, it's what you do with that time that counts.' And one of the things Poorna has started doing to fill up the hole, is weight lifting. 'I've found it really empowering, engaging in a solitary activity that is wholly mine. It's not only making me stronger physically, but mentally, too. I feel like I'm growing my inner strength and sense of self every day.'

And so we come back to resilience. Because we can't choose what life throws at us, we can't control the death of a loved one, but perhaps we can look after ourselves and give our grief the time and space it needs – at Christmas, and always. 🐾

In Search of Silence by Poorna Bell (£15, Simon & Schuster) is out now. poornabell.com



Poorna's tips for grief over the festive period



FOR THE GRIEVING

- **Create space** – don't feel guilty about setting boundaries for yourself over the festive period. It's better to say no and take time to yourself if you need it.
- **Choose your people** – surround yourself with those you can talk to about your feelings, and remember you're not responsible for other people's discomfort.
- **Allow sadness** but also, if you feel a moment of joy, enjoy it and don't feel guilty. Share stories and bring your loved one into your day.

FOR SUPPORTING

- **Check in on your friends and loved ones** over the festive period (and on any important day for them). This could just be a text, or better still, a hand-written card acknowledging their loss.
- **Ask about the loved one.** You won't be reminding them they're gone (they already know), but you will create a safe space for them to reminisce and talk about them if they want to.
- **Offer support in a tangible way** – whether that's taking them out for lunch, helping with childcare duties or cooking them a meal. Don't expect that a grieving person will know what they need, so just offer anyway.

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