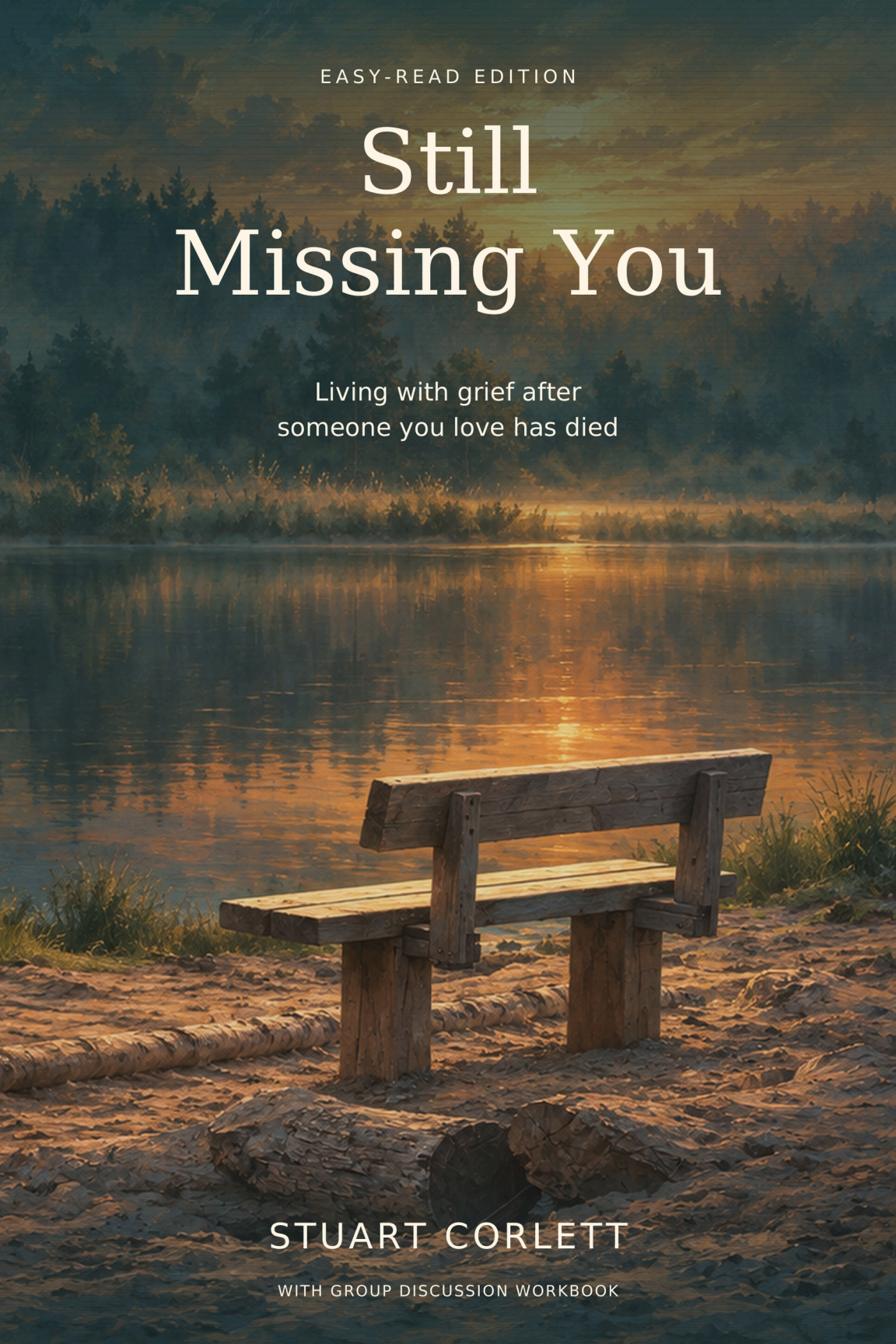


The background of the entire cover is a soft, painterly illustration of a sunset or sunrise over a calm body of water. The sky is filled with warm, golden light that reflects on the water's surface. In the foreground, a simple wooden bench sits on a sandy shore, facing away from the viewer towards the water. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

EASY-READ EDITION

Still Missing You

Living with grief after
someone you love has died

STUART CORLETT

WITH GROUP DISCUSSION WORKBOOK

STILL MISSING YOU

Living with grief after someone you love has died

STUART CORLETT

Still Missing You: Living with grief after someone you love has died

Easy-read edition with group discussion workbook

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Book 1 of a three-book easy-read series. An easy-read version of Bereavement: How do I live without you?

This book is not a substitute for medical, psychological or legal advice. If you are worried about yourself or someone else, please talk to a doctor or another qualified professional.

Unless otherwise stated, the people described in this book are imagined, and are introduced as such.

Contents

A Note from Stuart.....	1
1. The Person Who Is Missing.....	5
2. There Is No Timetable.....	9
3. Grief and Your Body.....	13
4. Love Does Not Have to End.....	17
5. Belief and Hope.....	22
6. Everyday Life Still Needs Doing.....	25
7. Help That Really Helps.....	28
8. Laughing Again.....	32
9. Birthdays, Anniversaries and Special Days.....	36
10. “If Only”.....	40
11. Families, Friends and Loneliness.....	44
12. When Children Grieve.....	47
13. When Loss Is Hard.....	51
14. When Someone Else Is Grieving.....	54
Carrying Love Forward.....	58
About the Author.....	60
Group Discussion Workbook.....	61

A Note from Stuart

Chances are, if you've picked up this book, you're hoping for some answers. These books grew out of a search for understanding. I've always found that understanding something helps me work out what to do. I hope they give you something to think through, both on your own and with friends. Researching and writing them helped me. If that's all they ever do, I'm happy.

I'm getting older, and so are my friends. So are you. Gone are the days when I could ride my motorcycle at high speed and feel invincible. I also feel more at risk in the war zones where I work. Looking back, some of the things I did when I was younger were downright dangerous. There might be a book in that.

My mother died by suicide when I was in my thirties. The experience changed me in many ways, some of which I still struggle to explain. My marriage collapsed in my fifties, something I had hoped would never happen

to me. I've walked alongside friends through great difficulties. I've also spoken with hundreds of people from Myanmar who have experienced atrocities, most of which I won't describe here.

Yet, through what I've lived and witnessed, I've seen people find ways to go on, often with great happiness. I've found ways, too.

There have been times when I've felt like giving up on trying to be a decent person or a positive influence in the world. I've wondered whether it would be easier to harden my heart and stop feeling so much.

But I've come to think that, within a generation of my death, most people will have forgotten who I was. Perhaps what remains will be the influence I had: something I did or said that made a difference to someone, who then made a difference to someone else.

So, my friend, these books won't give you all the answers. But perhaps, if you take time to reflect, there's something in them for you.

I've practiced as a pharmacist on and off since 1989. Over the years, many people have come to the pharmacy

counter carrying grief. Some were collecting medicine for someone who was dying. Some were bringing back medicine that was no longer needed. Many did not say what was wrong. But you could often tell.

For about twenty years, I also did health work in Thailand, much of it among Shan communities on the border with Myanmar. I worked among people from many different traditions. Some were Buddhist. Some were Muslim. Some were Christian. Some believed in spirits and ancestors. They all mourned in their own ways.

One thing I noticed was this. People were often told that they were grieving the wrong way. Too much, or too little. Too soon, or too late.

This book is here to say: there is no one right way to grieve.

This is a short, easy-to-read book. It is based on a longer book of mine called *Bereavement*. If you want more detail, you can read that one.

In this book you will meet some people. Most of them are made up, to help explain an idea. When a person is made

up, I will say “imagine” or “suppose”. That way, you will always know.

At the back of the book there is a workbook. You can use it in a group, or on your own.

If someone you love has died, I am sorry. I hope this book gives you a little more room to remember, to rest, to ask for help, and, when you are ready, to enjoy life again.

Stuart Corlett
Carterton, New Zealand

The Person Who Is Missing

Grief starts with a simple fact. Someone has died.

That sounds too obvious to say. But many explanations of grief seem to forget it. They talk about our feelings, our fears and our “recovery”. The person who died almost disappears from the story.

This book keeps that person at the centre.

A question many people ask

After a death, many people find themselves asking a quiet question. Sometimes they say it out loud. Sometimes only at three in the morning.

How do I live without you?

Every word in that question matters.

The word “you” means this is about one special person. Losing a husband after forty years is not the same as losing a child. It is not the same as losing a parent you had not spoken to for years. Every loss is different.

The word “live” means this is about more than feelings. It is about meals and money. It is about sleep and work. It is about who fixes the car, who pays the bills, and who you tell about your day.

It is not only about fear

Some people say grief is really about fear. When someone dies, they say, we are reminded that we will die too.

Sometimes that is part of it. But it is not the whole story.

Try this. Imagine someone you love has died. Now imagine you are promised that you yourself will never be sick and never die. Would your grief go away?

For most people, the answer is no. You would still miss them. Their chair would still be empty. Their voice would still be gone.

Grief is mostly about the person. It is about missing them.

More than one kind of loss

When someone dies, we can lose many things at once.

We lose the person. We may also lose help, money, company, or a plan for the future. Maybe you had planned to travel together. Maybe you had tickets to a concert. Maybe you just always had coffee on Tuesdays.

Someone else might offer to take you to that concert. That can be kind. But it is not the same. The plan was with *this* person. No one can replace them.

It is also normal to worry about practical things. Money. The house. Who will help now. Some people feel ashamed of these worries. There is no need. They are part of an honest relationship. Worrying about money does not mean you did not love them.

Listen to what people actually say

Imagine a woman whose husband has died. She says, “The evenings are the worst. I have no one to tell about my day.”

A friend might think she is really talking about something deep and hidden. But she has told us exactly what is wrong. The hour after dinner has become very quiet.

A good friend might start there. What used to happen in the evening? What could make it a little easier now?

When someone tells us about their grief, it is wise to listen to their words. We do not need to look for a hidden meaning.

There Is No Timetable

The “stages” of grief

You may have heard that grief has stages. Denial, anger, bargaining, sadness, and finally acceptance.

Some people find this helpful. It gives names to feelings. But there is a problem. People start to think grief *must* happen in that order.

If you do not feel angry, you may wonder if you are grieving properly. If you feel sad again after a good month, someone may say you are “going backwards”.

But grief does not follow a timetable.

What really happens

People who study grief have followed widowed people over many months and years. They found that people grieve in different ways.

Some people struggle for a long time. Some struggle at first, then slowly feel a bit better. Some people seem to cope fairly steadily from the start.

None of these is the “right” way. A person who seems to cope well may still miss their partner every day. A person who struggles is not weak.

Grief goes back and forth

A gentler way to think about grief is that it goes back and forth.

Some days you face the loss directly. You cry. You look at photos. You remember.

Other days you deal with the practical changes. Paying bills. Learning to cook. Sorting out paperwork.

And sometimes you just rest from both. You watch a film. You go for a walk. You think about something else.

All of these are normal. Grief is not a straight line.

Other people’s clocks

Even without “stages”, other people can put pressure on you.

Your boss expects you back at work. A relative wants the bedroom cleared out. A friend thinks you should be “over it” by now.

Imagine a man whose wife has died. He goes back to work after three weeks, because he needs the money. But he still cannot open her wardrobe.

One person might say going back to work is healthy, but the wardrobe is a problem. Another might say the opposite. The truth is, neither tells us much. It depends on his money, on what the wardrobe means to him, and on what he wants.

A deadline at work is not a deadline for grief.

Better in some ways, not in others

Imagine a woman whose partner has died. She is back at work. She still sleeps badly. She enjoys seeing friends on some afternoons. She dreads coming home to an empty house.

Is she “better”? The question is too simple. Her work, her sleep, her moods and her home are all different parts of her life. Each may change at its own pace.

A hard day on an anniversary does not undo all the good days. And one happy day does not mean all her needs are gone.

When to get help

There is no right timetable. But sometimes grief becomes very heavy and does not ease at all over a long time. It may stop someone from eating, sleeping, working, or seeing anyone.

If that is happening to you, or to someone you know, please talk to a doctor or another health professional. This does not mean you are grieving wrongly. It just means you deserve support.

In New Zealand, you can call or text 1737 at any time to talk to a trained counsellor. In other countries, your doctor can tell you who to contact.

Grief and Your Body

Grief is not only in your mind

Grief is felt in the body as well as the heart. Many people are surprised by this.

After a death, you may feel tired all the time, even after sleeping. You may sleep badly, or wake very early. You may not feel like eating, or you may eat more than usual. Your chest may feel tight. Your head may ache. You may catch every cold that goes around.

Many people also find it hard to concentrate. You may walk into a room and forget why. You may read the same page three times. You may lose your keys, miss appointments, or forget to pay a bill.

All of this is very common. It does not mean you are going mad. It is your body and mind carrying something heavy.

Looking after the basics

When you are grieving, small things can feel like big jobs. It may help to think about just a few basics.

Try to eat something regularly, even if it is small and simple. Toast, soup or a piece of fruit is fine. If friends offer meals, it is okay to say yes.

Drink water. It is easy to forget.

Get outside for a short time each day if you can, even just to the letterbox or around the block.

Try to keep a rough routine for getting up and going to bed. It does not need to be perfect.

These are not rules. They are just small ways to be kind to your body while it does a hard job.

Be careful with alcohol

Some people find that a drink or two helps them get through the evenings. But alcohol can make sleep worse, low moods lower, and loneliness deeper. It can also be dangerous with some medicines.

If you notice you are drinking more than usual, or need a drink to get through the day, it is worth talking to your doctor. There is no shame in that.

Your own medicines and health

When someone close to you dies, it is easy to forget about your own health. This is especially true if you spent a long time caring for them.

Imagine a woman who nursed her husband for two years. She made sure he took every tablet on time. After he dies, she realises she has not been to her own doctor in months, and she keeps forgetting her own blood pressure tablets.

If you take regular medicines, try to keep taking them as prescribed. A pill box, or a reminder on your phone, can help. Your pharmacist can help you sort out a simple routine.

Grief can sometimes make existing health problems worse. If you have a long-term condition, let your doctor know about your loss.

Sleep

Sleep often goes wrong after a death. Nights can be the loneliest time. Some people find it hard to sleep in the bed they shared.

Some things that may help: going to bed and getting up at about the same time; a short walk during the day; keeping a notebook by the bed to write down worries; listening to a radio programme or gentle music.

If sleep stays very bad for a long time, talk to your doctor. Please do not take someone else's sleeping tablets, or use old medicines left over from the person who died. Medicines that were right for them may not be safe for you. Your pharmacist can take back any medicines that are no longer needed.

When to see a doctor

See a doctor if you are worried about your health, if you have new symptoms that do not go away, or if you are finding it very hard to get through each day.

Get help straight away if you have chest pain, trouble breathing, or thoughts of harming yourself. In New Zealand, call 111 in an emergency, or call or text 1737 to talk to a counsellor.

Looking after yourself is not selfish. It is part of carrying on.

Love Does Not Have to End

Staying connected

When someone dies, many people feel that the relationship goes on in some way.

They may talk to the person in their head. They may keep special things. They may visit the grave. They may cook the person's favourite meal on their birthday.

People sometimes call these "continuing bonds". It simply means a connection that continues.

For some people, this is a great comfort. For others, it is not. Some people prefer to remember quietly. Both are fine.

You do not have to decide what it means

Some people believe the person who died is still with them in a real way. Some believe they will meet again. Some believe death is the end. Many are not sure.

You can say, “I feel my mother is close to me,” without having to explain exactly what you mean. And a friend can listen without having to agree or disagree.

When memories fade

Over time, you may find you cannot quite hear their voice anymore. You may forget a date or a detail. This can be very upsetting.

But forgetting a detail does not mean you loved them less. Love is not a memory test.

Imagine two widows. One has a recording of her husband’s voice but rarely plays it. The other has no recording and cannot quite remember how he laughed. Neither of these facts tells us which marriage mattered more.

It is okay to be sad about what fades. But it is not a failure.

“I know what she would say”

People often say, “I know what Mum would have told me.”

That can be a lovely way of keeping someone close. But be gentle with it. The person cannot answer back anymore. Your life may be very different from anything they knew.

Imagine a woman deciding whether to leave a safe job for a risky one. She is sure her late father would have said, “Be careful.” She may be right. He usually did.

But she can ask what his caution was really about. Was it love? Worry about money? Life in harder times? Thinking this through can help her understand him, while still making her own choice.

Loving someone does not mean doing everything they would have wanted.

Things they left behind

Their belongings can mean a lot. A chipped cup can bring back their hand more strongly than anything expensive.

Deciding what to keep is hard. Space, money, moving house and other family members all come into it. If you cannot keep everything, it does not mean you loved them

less. If you keep a lot, it does not mean you cannot accept the death.

Feeling them near

Many grieving people say that, for a moment, they felt the person was near. A footstep. A smell. A feeling that someone was sitting beside them.

This is common. It is not usually a sign that something is wrong. Some people find it comforting. Some find it unsettling.

Imagine a man who tells a friend, “For a moment, it felt like my wife was beside me on the couch.” The friend does not need to argue about what it means. She might simply ask, “Was that a good moment, or a hard one?”

And if you never feel anything like this, that is fine too. It does not mean your love was weaker.

Changing without leaving them behind

You may keep some traditions and change others. Over time, the way you remember may change too.

Imagine a grandfather who stops going to his late wife’s yearly memorial service. Instead, he starts teaching his

granddaughter the card game his wife taught him. He has not stopped remembering. He has found a new way.

There is no right way to stay connected. And for some people, especially if the relationship was painful, staying connected is not wanted at all. That is okay too. We will come back to that in Chapter 13.

Belief and Hope

Many beliefs, many hopes

People have many different beliefs about what happens after death.

A Buddhist family might think of rebirth. A Muslim family might pray for mercy in the life to come. A Christian family might speak of heaven. Some traditions speak of ancestors or spirits who stay close. And many people, in every tradition and none, simply hope, without being sure.

Belief does not always take the pain away

Imagine a woman who is certain her husband is at peace. That belief may comfort her about *him*. But it may not help her loneliness. She still has no one to talk to in the evening.

So a friend who says, “But he’s in a better place,” may not be helping as much as they think. Peace for him and company for her are two different things.

Imagine a man who hopes to see his wife again, but is not sure. His hope may give him strength on some days. On other days, his doubt may hurt.

There is no right amount of belief. A person who believes strongly can still grieve deeply. A person who does not believe can still find comfort in memories and in friends.

Kind words that are not always kind

People say many things to try to help.

“Everything happens for a reason.”

“God needed another angel.”

“At least they’re not suffering anymore.”

The person saying these things means well. But the person hearing them may not share that belief. They may find it hurtful, or they may simply not be ready.

It is usually kinder to say what you believe as your own belief. “I hope you’ll see him again one day” is gentler than “You will see him again.”

And it is just as unkind to tell a believer that their hope is “just wishful thinking”.

Planning a service together

Imagine a family planning a funeral. One sister wants to say firmly that the family will all meet again. Her brother is not sure he believes that.

They do not have to settle the question of the afterlife before the service. A speaker can say, “*I believe I will see her again,*” without saying everyone in the room must believe it. A reading can be offered without anyone having to join in.

You can stay unsure

You do not need a complete answer about death before you can grieve. You can hope, and doubt, and change your mind over time. None of these is a measure of how much you loved the person.

Everyday Life Still Needs Doing

A death changes daily life

We often talk about “coping with grief” as if it is all about feelings. But a death often changes the practical world too.

Someone has to cook now. Someone has to pay the bills, mow the lawns, look after the children, or care for an older parent. Money may be tighter. Decisions that used to be shared must now be made alone.

These things matter. If a widow cannot visit friends because she no longer has a car, that is not “withdrawing”. It is a practical problem that needs a practical answer.

Every loss counts

Some losses are not always recognised. A close friend. A former partner. A carer. A partner in a relationship that had to be kept quiet. A much-loved pet.

Each of these can be a real and painful loss, even if no form or rule has a box for it.

No one should have to prove how sad they are to have their loss taken seriously.

When rules and forms get in the way

Imagine a benefit form that has a box for a husband or wife, but none for the lifelong friend who helped care for someone in their last months. The form has not found out that the friendship mattered less. It just has a rule.

Organisations need rules. But good organisations can explain them, allow for exceptions, and avoid asking for private details they do not need.

Sometimes it is not the grieving person who needs to change. Sometimes it is the paperwork.

Different ways of mourning

Here in Aotearoa New Zealand, Māori tangihanga show a very different way of mourning. It is shared, done together over days, and connected with people and place. In Thailand and Myanmar, mourning might involve monks, merit-making, prayers in a mosque or church, or offerings to spirits.

These are not just “decorations” on top of a single, universal way of grieving. Each one carries its own

understanding of what a person is, and what we owe
when someone dies.

There is no one correct way to mourn.

Help That Really Helps

Many kinds of help

Help can mean a doctor or a counsellor. It can also mean a meal on the doorstep, a lift to an appointment, someone to sit with on a Sunday afternoon, or someone who knows how to deal with the bank.

These are all different. You do not need proof that a casserole will “lower your grief” for it to be worth bringing. It is worth bringing because the person needs to eat.

Help often arrives in a rush around the funeral, then slowly stops. But many of the hardest practical problems come later. It is worth checking in a few weeks and months on. Ask, “What is hardest right now?”

“Let me know if I can do anything”

This is one of the most common things people say. It is kindly meant. But it leaves all the work with the grieving person.

Imagine a woman whose partner has just died. She gets a dozen kind messages saying, “Let me know if you need anything.” To use them, she has to work out what needs doing, decide who could do each thing, call them, and explain. She may be too tired to do any of that.

A friend could try something more specific. “I could pick up your shopping on Thursday, or come with you to the bank on Monday. Or neither, if you’d rather.”

That makes it easy to say yes. It also makes it easy to say no.

Asking first

Even a kind offer can come at the wrong time. A meal dropped off without asking might arrive when the fridge is already full. A visit might wake someone who has only just fallen asleep.

It is usually best to ask first. And if you are helping, keep private things private. Helping with errands does not give you permission to share someone’s news, money worries, or family arguments with others.

Different people want different company

Imagine two brothers whose mother has died. One wants to talk about her a lot. The other wants a friend to sit with him and watch the rugby.

The second brother is not “avoiding” his grief. He has simply said what he wants today.

A simple question can help: “Would you like to talk about her, or not today?” That leaves room for either answer.

Not every friend can meet every need. One friend may be wonderful at practical jobs but not good at deep talks. Another may be a great listener but always late. That is normal.

When help needs to change

Imagine a neighbour who visits a widow every evening after her husband dies. At first, it makes coming home bearable. After some weeks, the widow would like some evenings alone. But she worries her neighbour will be hurt.

The neighbour can make this easier by asking now and then, “Is this still helpful?” That gives the widow

permission to change things without feeling she is being ungrateful.

Change works the other way too. If someone has come to rely on you for a weekly lift, give some notice before you stop, and help find another way if you can.

When to get professional help

Most people do not need special treatment to grieve. But some people find that grief stays very heavy for a long time and makes everyday life very hard. Talking therapies can help with this.

If you want professional help, you do not need to wait for permission or for grief to get “bad enough”. And if you do not want it, no one should push you. The best help is help you can choose, reach, and say no to.

Laughing Again

Is it okay to enjoy things?

After a death, many people feel guilty the first time they laugh or enjoy something. It can feel like a betrayal.

But enjoying something does not mean you have stopped loving the person. And not being able to enjoy anything does not show how much you loved them either.

Grief and joy can live side by side.

Humour can hurt and help

Imagine hearing a really funny joke. You laugh. Then, straight away, you think of the person you would have told it to. The laugh belongs to the joke. The ache belongs to the missing person. Both are real.

People who have studied this have found that humour after a loss can bring relief and a painful rush of memory, sometimes at the same moment.

Taking a break is not running away

Earlier we said grief goes back and forth. Sometimes we face the loss. Sometimes we deal with practical things. Sometimes we just rest.

Watching a funny film, going for a walk, gardening, or playing cards can all be ways of resting. They are not a sign that you have stopped caring.

Laughing together after a funeral

Imagine a family dinner after a funeral. Someone remembers how Grandad always gave long, detailed directions and then got lost himself. One cousin laughs. An aunt cries. An uncle gets cross.

The same memory can mean different things to different people. Laughing is not wrong. Crying is not wrong. It helps to notice how others are feeling, and to let people join in, or not, without being judged.

The pleasure with no one to share it

Some pleasures were made for two. You see something beautiful and want to tell them. You make their favourite meal and there is no one to say “That’s lovely.”

Imagine a man who keeps tending the garden he and his wife made together. He loses three things at once: help with the work, someone to admire the roses with, and the future they had planned. Enjoying a flower does not fix any of these. But it does show that there is something besides sadness in his afternoon.

Recipes and traditions

Imagine two sisters. One wants to make their late mother's Christmas pudding exactly the same way every year. The other has had to change one ingredient because it can no longer be bought.

Both love their mother. One finds connection in doing it exactly the same. The other finds it in still making it at all. Neither is wrong. They might write down the original recipe and allow some changes.

When nothing brings joy

Sometimes nothing feels good. That is okay too. You do not have to feel happy to be “doing well”.

It can help to tell the difference between not *wanting* company, not *having* any company, and not having the *energy* for company. These need different kinds of help.

If you have felt unable to enjoy anything for a long time,
please talk to your doctor.

Birthdays, Anniversaries and Special Days

The first year of “firsts”

The first year after a death is full of “firsts”. The first birthday without them. The first Christmas. The first wedding anniversary. The first time the family gets together and someone is missing.

These days can be very hard. Many people say the days leading up to them were even harder than the day itself. The dread can be worse than the day.

It also does not always get easier after the first year. Some people find the second year harder, once everyone else has moved on. That is normal too.

You can make a plan

It can help to think about a special day before it comes. You might ask yourself:

- Do I want to be with people, or on my own?

- Do I want to do something to remember them, or have a quiet ordinary day?
- Is there a tradition I want to keep, change, or have a break from?
- Who could I let know how I am feeling?

You do not have to follow your plan. You can change your mind on the day. But having a rough idea can make the days before feel less frightening.

Ways people remember

People mark special days in many ways. Some visit the grave or the place where ashes were scattered. Some light a candle. Some cook the person's favourite food. Some do something the person loved, like going fishing or walking on the beach. Some give to a charity in the person's name. Some simply say the person's name out loud at the dinner table.

Others prefer to keep the day as normal as possible. That is fine too.

There is no right way. What matters is that it feels right for you.

When the family wants different things

Imagine a family coming up to the first Christmas after their father died. Their mother wants everyone together, just like always. One son wants to go away somewhere new. The youngest daughter wants to go to her friend's house as usual.

None of these wishes shows who loved their father most. The family might find a way to give each person some of what they need. Perhaps they share a meal together, then each person is free to spend the rest of the day their own way.

It helps to talk about it before the day, not on the day itself.

Days that catch you by surprise

Not all hard days are on the calendar. A song in the supermarket. Their handwriting on an old note. Seeing someone in a crowd who looks just like them.

These moments can hit hard, even years later. They do not mean you are going backwards. They are a sign that the person still matters to you.

Telling others what helps

Friends and family often do not know what to do on special days. Some stay away, worried they will upset you. Some talk about everything except the person who died.

It is okay to tell people what you would like. “Please say his name.” “I’d love a call on Tuesday, it’s her birthday.” “I’d rather not talk about it this week.”

Most people want to help. They just do not know how.

“If Only”

“I should have...”

After a death, many people think, *I should have noticed sooner. I should have said something different. I should have stayed longer.*

Some of these thoughts point to real mistakes. Many are not fair to ourselves. They expect us to have known things we could not have known.

You did not know then what you know now

When you made a choice, you did not know what would happen next. It is not fair to judge that choice using knowledge you only got later.

Imagine a man who did not answer a phone call from his mother one afternoon. She died suddenly that night. He had no reason to think it was an emergency. He wishes, terribly, that he had picked up. That is regret. It is not the same as being guilty of doing something wrong.

The last conversation

Imagine a woman whose last conversation with her brother was a small argument. Then he died suddenly.

That argument now feels huge. But when it happened, neither of them knew it was the last time they would talk. It was just an ordinary argument. It does not sum up their whole relationship.

A relationship is much more than its last moment.

The road not taken

Imagine a daughter who had to choose between two treatments for her father. After he dies, she thinks the other treatment would have saved him.

But no one knows that. The other choice looks perfect only because it was never tried. What we imagine might have happened is not the same as what we know.

When there was a real mistake

Sometimes there really was a wrong. A cruel word. A broken promise. A time someone was let down.

Being honest about that can help. You can say, "That was wrong of me," without deciding that you caused

everything that happened. And you can say sorry without believing you are a bad person through and through.

Saying “You did everything you could” is not always true. Sometimes a kinder thing to say is, “Let’s look at what really happened.”

Too much to carry

Imagine a woman who cared for her husband through a long illness. She wishes she had been more patient. There may have been some days when she snapped at him. There was also exhaustion, fear, and no one to help her.

Both are true. Her circumstances do not make every sharp word okay. But one sharp word does not wipe out years of care.

Feeling relief after a long illness is also very common. Relief that the suffering is over. Relief that the exhaustion has ended. It does not mean you wanted the person gone.

When family members blame

Sometimes other people say, “Why didn’t you do something sooner?”

Often, the person asking was not there. The person who was there may remember confusing advice and many attempts to get help. They may disagree about what was known at the time.

It can help to work out, gently, who knew what, and when. Sometimes a family will never fully agree. That does not mean someone has to be blamed.

Saying sorry when they cannot answer

When someone has died, you cannot get their forgiveness in the usual way. Some people write letters. Some talk to the person in their mind. Some change how they treat other people.

These things can mean a lot. They do not prove the person has forgiven you. But they can be a way of living honestly with what happened.

Families, Friends and Loneliness

Everyone loses someone different

When someone dies in a family, each person loses someone different. To one person, she was a mother. To another, a wife. To another, a sister or a grandmother.

So family members may grieve in very different ways. That does not mean anyone loves more or less.

Losing a pregnancy

Losing a pregnancy can be a deep loss, even if few people knew about it. The person who was pregnant may feel things differently from their partner. Both losses are real. Neither should have to match the other to be taken seriously.

Lonely in a full room

Being lonely and being alone are not the same. You can be surrounded by people and still miss one particular person. You can have only a few friends and feel that is enough.

New friends can be wonderful. But they cannot share your history. They did not know you as a child. They never saw the house you grew up in. Losing someone who knew all that can bring a special kind of loneliness.

Imagine a woman who meets friends every week after her brother dies. She enjoys their company. But none of them knew her parents or remember the summer the river flooded. When she says she feels alone, she is not ungrateful. She is missing a particular kind of company.

Invitations

Imagine a recently widowed woman who keeps being invited to dinners where everyone else comes as a couple. The invitation says, “You still belong.” But it may also make her feel her loss more.

She might suggest something different: a smaller group, or a walk instead of a dinner. The host might simply ask, “What would make it easier for you to come?”

New relationships

In time, some people find a new friend or partner. This can raise worries about loyalty to the person who died.

A new relationship does not erase the old one. And no one should be pushed into a new relationship, or criticised for having one. There is no timetable for this either.

When the family has to decide things

After a death, families often have to decide about money, the house, and belongings. This can lead to arguments.

Imagine two brothers. One wants more time before selling their mother's house. The other is paying for the storage and driving two hours every weekend to look after it. Both have a point. Neither is uncaring. The real question is how to share the costs fairly.

When Children Grieve

Children grieve too

Children grieve, even very young ones. But they often grieve differently from adults.

A child may cry one minute and want to play the next. That does not mean they have not understood, or that they do not care. Children often grieve in short bursts. Play can be how they rest, and how they make sense of things.

Use clear, simple words

Adults often try to soften the news. They say the person has “gone to sleep”, “gone away” or that “we lost them”.

Children can find these words confusing or even frightening. A child told that Grandma “went to sleep” may become scared of going to sleep. A child told that Dad “went away” may wait for him to come back.

It is usually kinder to use clear words. “Grandma has died. Her body stopped working. She can’t feel any pain.”

You can then share your family's beliefs as well, in a way the child can understand.

It is okay to say "I don't know" when a child asks something you cannot answer.

Understanding grows over time

Children understand death bit by bit as they grow.

Imagine a girl who knows her father has died and will not come back. A year later, there is a school concert. All the other dads are in the audience. The loss means something new to her now.

A child may ask the same question many times. It may be a slightly different question each time. Or they may just need to hear the answer again. Patience helps.

Should children go to the funeral?

There is no one answer. Many children are glad later that they went. Some are not ready.

It helps to explain beforehand what will happen. Who will be there. What the room will look like. That people may be crying. Whether they will see the body. Then the

child can choose, with an adult they trust beside them to look after them on the day.

A child who does not go can still be included in other ways. They might draw a picture, choose a song, or help plant a tree later.

Children should not carry the family

Imagine a fourteen-year-old girl whose mother has died. She starts cooking dinner, looking after her little brother and comforting her father.

Helping can be good for children. It can make them feel part of the family. But she should be free to say she is tired, and adults should make sure the load is shared.

Her father may say, “You’re being so strong.” He means it as praise. But it can also feel like a request to keep going and not show her own sadness. A better response might be: “Thank you. You’ve been a big help. But you don’t have to do all this. Let’s work out who else can help.”

Children should never be made responsible for keeping adults happy.

When to get extra help for a child

Most grieving children do not need special treatment. They need love, honesty, routine and patience.

But some children struggle a lot, for a long time. They may stop eating, have nightmares for months, refuse to go to school, or seem very withdrawn or angry. If you are worried, talk to their doctor or school. There are talking therapies that can help children who are really stuck.

When Loss Is Hard

Sudden and violent deaths

How someone dies can change what the people left behind must face. A sudden death can leave many questions. A violent death may bring police, courts, and a long wait for answers. There may be ongoing danger.

In these situations, being told to “move on” can be very hurtful. You can learn to live with a loss and still want justice. Those two things are not in conflict.

When someone is missing

Some people live with a loss that has never been confirmed. Someone has gone missing, and no one knows what happened.

Imagine a woman whose husband has been missing for a year. She has to decide whether to move to another town for work. Staying keeps her where he could find her. Moving might help her pay the bills, but feel like giving up.

No one else can make this decision for her. She can make choices for now without having to decide, once and for all, whether he will come back. She can hope and still be realistic.

Many losses, one after another

Some people lose many family members, one after another. Each loss lands on top of the one before. Support may run out.

Praising someone for being “strong” can sometimes hide how much they have been asked to carry. No one should have to keep proving they can cope.

Grieving someone who hurt you

Some relationships are not simple. The person who died may have been loving at some times and cruel at others.

Imagine a man whose father taught him to fix bicycles, and also embarrassed him in front of the family, again and again. After his father dies, he misses those quiet hours in the shed. Missing those hours does not mean the cruelty was okay. And remembering the cruelty does not mean the good times were fake.

You can miss someone and still say they hurt you.

Some people feel relief when someone who hurt them dies. Relief that the criticism has stopped, or the fear has ended. That is not wicked. It is honest.

You do not have to forgive

People may tell you to forgive. Forgiveness can be good for some people. But it should never be the price of being cared for. You can grieve without forgiving. You can also forgive without pretending nothing happened.

Funerals for complicated people

Imagine two sisters planning their mother's funeral. One wants to talk about how generous she was. The other cannot bear to hear her called "always kind".

One way through is for each speaker to talk about their own experience. "Mum gave me chances I'll always be grateful for" is different from "Everyone found her generous." That way, no one has to pretend.

Some people may choose to stay away, or to remember privately. That does not mean they do not care.

When Someone Else Is Grieving

Not knowing what to say

Many people are afraid of saying the wrong thing to someone who is grieving. So they say nothing at all. They cross the road, or stop calling.

To the grieving person, silence can feel like being forgotten. A simple message is usually better than none. “I’m so sorry. I’m thinking of you.” That is enough.

You do not need perfect words. You just need to show up.

Say their name

Many grieving people say the same thing. They want others to talk about the person who died.

Friends often avoid the name, worried it will upset them. But the person is already thinking about them. Hearing someone else say the name can feel like a gift. It shows that the person is not forgotten.

You could share a memory. “I’ll always remember how your dad laughed at his own jokes.” Small stories like this can mean a great deal.

Listen more than you talk

When someone is grieving, the most helpful thing is often to listen.

Try not to rush in with advice. Try not to compare. “I know exactly how you feel, my dog died last year” may be meant kindly, but it moves the attention away from them.

You do not have to fix anything. Grief cannot be fixed. You can only keep someone company in it.

Things that are better left unsaid

Some common sayings can hurt, even when meant well:

- “They’re in a better place.”
- “Everything happens for a reason.”
- “At least they had a long life.”
- “You need to be strong.”
- “You should be over it by now.”

Each of these tells the person how they should feel. It is usually kinder to say less. “This is so hard” is honest and gentle.

Offer real, specific help

As Chapter 7 said, “Let me know if you need anything” leaves the work with them. Try offering one or two specific things instead. Mowing the lawns. Picking up the children. Bringing a meal on Thursday. And make it easy for them to say no.

Stay for the long haul

Most support comes in the first few weeks. Then it fades. But grief does not stop after the funeral.

Put the anniversary in your calendar. Send a message on their birthday. Invite them out a few months on, when everyone else has gone quiet. Ask how they are really doing.

Look after yourself too

Supporting someone who is grieving can be tiring, especially if you are grieving too. It is okay to have limits. You cannot be everything to one person. Encourage them to have other people around them as well, and if you are

worried about them, gently suggest they talk to their doctor.

You do not have to be perfect. You just have to care, and keep turning up.

Carrying Love Forward

How do I live without you?

There is no one answer. But here is what this book has tried to say.

You do not have to stop loving someone to go on living. You do not have to stay the same to keep remembering them.

There is no timetable for grief. There is no right amount of crying, or believing, or keeping things.

You can keep traditions or change them. You can feel the person near, or not. You can believe you will meet again, or not be sure.

You can laugh again without betraying them. You can feel relief without being cruel. You can miss someone who hurt you.

You can ask for help, and say no to help you do not want. You can tell people what you need.

And the person who died still matters. Not because of how sad you are, or how much you show it. They matter because of who they were, and what you shared.

The empty chair is real. So is the life still in front of you.

About the Author

Stuart Corlett has been a registered pharmacist since 1989 and practises at Carterton Pharmacy in the Wairarapa, New Zealand. From 2002 to 2023 he did humanitarian health work in Thailand and among Shan communities on the Thai–Myanmar border. He founded Circuit International, a New Zealand charity, in 2015.

This book is an easy-read version of his book

Bereavement: How do I live without you?

Group Discussion Workbook

Still Missing You

How to Use This Workbook

This workbook goes with each chapter of the book. You can use it in a group, or on your own.

For each chapter there are two parts.

Talking together has questions for a group. You do not have to answer all of them. Pick the ones that feel useful.

Just for you has questions to think about privately. There is space to write your own notes. No one else needs to see what you write.

Some ground rules for groups

- No one has to share anything they do not want to.
- What is said in the group stays in the group.
- Listen without trying to fix.
- There are no right or wrong answers.
- It is okay to cry, and okay to laugh.

Looking after yourself

Talking about grief can bring up strong feelings. Take breaks when you need them.

If you feel overwhelmed, or grief is making daily life very hard, please talk to your doctor. In New Zealand, you can call or text 1737 any time to talk to a trained counsellor.

Chapter 1: The Person Who Is Missing

Talking together

1. Who is the person you are missing? Tell the group a little about them, if you would like to.
2. What things did you lose when they died, apart from the person themselves? (For example: help, money, plans, company.)
3. Has anyone ever told you what your grief is “really” about? Did they get it right?
4. What is one small thing about everyday life that has changed since they died?

Just for you

1. Write their name. Then write three words that describe them.
2. What part of the day is hardest now? Why do you think that is?

My notes

Chapter 2: There Is No Timetable

Talking together

1. Had you heard of the “stages of grief” before? Did they help you, or worry you?
2. Has anyone put pressure on you to “move on” by a certain time? How did that feel?
3. Which parts of your life feel a bit easier now? Which still feel hard?
4. What do you do when you need a rest from grief?

Just for you

1. Draw a line across the page for the time since your loss. Mark the hardest days and the easier days.
2. What would you like other people to understand about your timing?

My notes

Chapter 3: Grief and Your Body

Talking together

1. Have you noticed grief in your body? (For example: tiredness, sleep, appetite, aches.)
2. What helps you look after the basics on hard days?
3. Has your own health been pushed aside while you cared for someone else?
4. What makes it hard to go to the doctor when you are grieving?

Just for you

1. How have you been sleeping and eating this week?
2. What is one small thing you could do to look after your body?

My notes

Chapter 4: Love Does Not Have to End

Talking together

1. Do you feel connected to the person who died? In what ways?
2. Is there a belonging of theirs that means a lot to you? Why that one?
3. Have you ever felt the person was near? You only need to share if you want to.
4. Is there a tradition you have kept, changed, or started since they died?

Just for you

1. If you could tell them one thing about your life now, what would it be?
2. Is there a memory that is fading that you would like to write down before it goes?

My notes

Chapter 5: Belief and Hope

Talking together

1. What beliefs about death did you grow up with? Have they changed?
2. Has anyone said something meant to comfort you that did not help? What would have helped more?
3. Can belief comfort you about one thing but not another? Share an example if you can.
4. How could a family with different beliefs plan a service together?

Just for you

1. What do you hope for, for the person who died?
2. What do you hope for, for yourself?

My notes

Chapter 6: Everyday Life Still Needs Doing

Talking together

1. What practical jobs have become harder since the death?
2. Has a form, rule or organisation made things more difficult? What would have helped?
3. Has your loss been fully recognised by others? If not, why do you think that is?
4. What mourning traditions are important in your family or culture?

Just for you

1. Make a list of practical things that need doing. Circle the ones someone else could help with.
2. Who could you ask?

My notes

Chapter 7: Help That Really Helps

Talking together

1. What is the most helpful thing anyone has done for you since your loss?
2. Has anyone offered help in a way that was hard to accept? What made it hard?
3. What could you say instead of “Let me know if I can do anything”?
4. Is there help you have needed that you have not been offered?

Just for you

1. Write down one specific thing you could ask for this week.
2. Is there any help you would like to stop or change?
How could you say so kindly?

My notes

Chapter 8: Laughing Again

Talking together

1. Can you remember the first time you laughed after your loss? How did it feel?
2. Is there a funny story about the person who died that you love to tell?
3. What helps you rest from grief, even for a short time?
4. Have you changed any traditions or recipes? How did others feel about it?

Just for you

1. Write down a happy memory of the person, in as much detail as you can.
2. What is one small thing you might enjoy this week?

My notes

Chapter 9: Birthdays, Anniversaries and Special Days

Talking together

1. Which special days have been hardest for you, or which are you dreading?
2. Were the days before harder than the day itself?
3. How do you, or your family, mark special days?
4. What would you like friends or family to do on those days?

Just for you

1. Think of the next special day coming up. What would you like that day to look like?
2. Who could you tell about your plan?

My notes

Chapter 10: “If Only”

Talking together

1. Do “if only” thoughts come up for you? You only need to share as much as you want.
2. What is the difference between regret and guilt? Can you think of an example?
3. How can we be honest about real mistakes without being too hard on ourselves?
4. Has anyone blamed you, or have you blamed someone else? How did that affect things?

Just for you

1. Write down one “if only” thought. Then write what you actually knew at the time.
2. Is there something you would like to say to the person who died? You could write it here as a letter.

My notes

Chapter 11: Families, Friends and Loneliness

Talking together

1. Did people in your family grieve in different ways?
How did you handle that?
2. If there are children in your life, how have they grieved?
3. What kind of company do you miss most?
4. What sort of invitation would you find easiest to accept?

Just for you

1. Who knew you in the “earlier chapters” of your life?
Is there anyone you could get in touch with?
2. What would make you feel a little less lonely right now?

My notes

Chapter 12: When Children Grieve

Talking together

1. How were you told about death when you were a child? What did you understand?
2. What words do you think are best when telling a child that someone has died?
3. Should children go to funerals? What do you think?
4. How can adults make sure children do not carry too much?

Just for you

1. Is there a child in your life who is grieving? What might they need from you?
2. If you were a child when someone died, what do you wish an adult had said or done?

My notes

Chapter 13: When Loss Is Hard

Talking together

1. Was there anything about how your person died that made grief harder?
2. Can someone miss a person and still say that person hurt them? What do you think?
3. What do you think about forgiveness? Should anyone be expected to forgive?
4. How could a funeral make room for different memories of the same person?

Just for you

1. Is there something about your loss that people do not seem to understand?
2. What do you need people to know?

My notes

Chapter 14: When Someone Else Is Grieving

Talking together

1. What helped you most when people reached out to you?
2. Has anyone said something that hurt, even though they meant well?
3. Why do you think people find it hard to say the person's name?
4. How can we keep supporting someone after the first few weeks?

Just for you

1. Is there someone you know who is grieving right now? What is one thing you could do for them?
2. What would you like people to say to you about the person you lost?

My notes

Carrying Love Forward

Talking together

1. Which idea from this book was most helpful to you?
2. Is there anything in the book you disagreed with?
3. What has it been like to talk about grief with this group?
4. What would you like to carry forward from your relationship with the person who died?

Just for you

1. Finish this sentence: “I will remember you by...”
2. Finish this sentence: “One thing I want for my own life now is...”

My notes
