



Welcome to this Courageous Conversation, our latest component of the 'Let's Talk About Grief' awareness campaign. In this discussion, we tackle popular myths about grief and explore why they're often misleading or problematic.

We're joined by Griefline's expert Marianne Bowdler and NALAG's specialist Cathy Banks. Together, they bring their extensive knowledge to challenge these myths and provide alternative perspectives to help us better understand and cope with grief and loss.

Salomie

Welcome to Griefline's Courageous Conversation series. I'm Salome and I'm so excited to be talking grief myths today with our experts, Cathy and Marianne. Welcome to the both of you.

Cathy

Well, thank you. It's a pleasure to be here.

Salomie

All right, so let's dive straight into this with myth one, which says **grief gets better over time because time heals all wounds**.

Cathy

Oh, that, that, that cliché.

Hey, Marianne, like, you know, time heals or wounds.

It's one of the common myths in our community that, you know, that, that grief is time limited and that, you know, I'm under these programme of we'll get better at a set, at a set timer, a set date. So not true. What I've found in the work that we that we do is that grief is so unique and individual and it takes as long as it takes. So there's not a set, you know, there's not a set 12 months or a set calendar timing, you know, for every individual, it's quite unique because it's their grief, it's their journey, it's their process.

Marianne

What are your thoughts, Marianne?

Marianne

Yeah, I always think it's funny when, like in psychology, it becomes a disorder after six months. It's sort of like, well, you know, now you know you've got a pathology or there's something wrong with you because you're sad after six months. But when we look at just a normal human experience or our religious traditions, our cultural traditions, art, music, poetry, everybody knows it takes, well, it takes as long as it takes. And there is no chance that, as you say, it's very individual, very personal.

Cathy

That's right.

Salomie

All right. Thank you for that. And we can move straight on to myth, two. **If you don't cry, it means you aren't truly sorry about the loss.**

Cathy

There's so many expressions of grief, you know, and, and many people will have different grieving styles. You know, like grief is so much more than emotional distress. You know, it's holistic. So grief impacts us emotionally and physically and, you know, in terms, spiritually, cognitively, you know, it's so universal. And if somebody isn't crying, that certainly does not mean they're not feeling.

You know, some people might have a more instrumental grieving style, which means perhaps they're expressing their grief process through thinking and doing as opposed to really engaging in an overt openly, you know, intuitive style, you know, of emotional distress. It doesn't mean they don't feel it, you know?

You know, and they can have their private moments when they're alone, driving in the car, in the shower, going for walks, you know, but it does not mean they don't feel. And that does not mean that they're not grieving.

Marianne

That's right. I remember I was, I was 11 when my brother died. And I didn't believe it. I didn't believe it. And because it wasn't true and it hadn't happened, I didn't cry. And it took me a long time to, to really understand that really happened. And, you know, months, I mean, I'm, I'm talking months and months and months before I actually sort of the penny dropped and I understood that he wasn't coming back. And then the sorrow came. But I did feel embarrassed that I wasn't crying. And I felt that I should be crying and

everybody would be expecting me to be crying. And I didn't know how to cry when I didn't feel sad because in my mind it hadn't happened. So that's that as well.

Cathy

That's right. That acceptance of the reality of the loss. You know, if we if we think about, you know, that work by Warden and he talks about us having those tasks and challenges of grief. And that first one is acceptance of the reality of the loss. And I think that takes us, you know, quite some time for that to be absorbed, that reality to be identified and then to be accepted.

Salomie

And, you know, we'll come back to that as well, Marianne, when we get further down myths. But let's get to myth 3 now. **If a person is suddenly feeling better after a loved one dies, it means their grief is over.**

Cathy

Is our grief ever really over?

Marianne

I think you do, though sometimes you think, oh, thank goodness, thank goodness. I've just had waves and waves of emotion and crying and I've cried a river and I've woken up today and do you know what? I think I should paint the kitchen. And you think it must be finished and it's over. And now I've got this surge of energy and I'm going to get things done and there's a huge relief. Oh, great. And then and then it hits you again and you're like, oh, it's not over. And you can experience like the pendulum swings of a clock. And they're quite extreme, extreme sorrow, dream energy. And, and over time, I think we find it, you know, it, it settles down.

Cathy

There's that oscillation, isn't there between, you know, being in that lost focus and being in the restoration focus. And when we're in that restoration phase there, it can be that relief, you know, Oh goodness, you know, I can function better. I can sort of re engage socially, always the worst behind me. But we do know that that our grieving process is ongoing and those waves and intense waves of emotion or distress can come back, maybe an anniversary, you know, maybe a sensory experience that can sort of, you know, remind us of our loved one and our loss and our changed world. But, you know, I, I, I don't believe that grief is something that, you know, like we spoke about. It's not

time limited. You know, it's not necessarily all about the tearfulness, but it's something that lives within us and sometimes we engage with it quite strongly and other times, you know, we feel I've integrated this quite well now. You know, I can remember with joy the relationship, but that's, that's not an immediate process, I don't think. It's not a linear 1:00 and it's 2 steps forward, one step back. It's a dance. I think of it more as a dance, you know.

Marianne

But it's also I, I find my grief can be sort of comforting. I know sometimes if I'm doing my Christmas shopping and I'll see something and I'll think my brother would love this. I should get that for him.

And then I'm like, oh, no, he died. And then it's a moment. It's just sort of, it's poignant, you know, it's, I'm thinking about him. He's with me. I know exactly what he'd like, but OK, he has died and, and it's a grief, but it doesn't bring me to tears anymore. But it's just the love is still there.

Cathy

It's the connection. Don't you think it's that it's that reminder of the connection, the considering bond. I'm it's we're still connected, you know?

Salomie

Yeah, those were those were beautiful insights. And I agree wholeheartedly. Like you can have learned how to integrate your grief and then you think you're doing all right. And it can be years and years and then something happens. And I speak to this from personal experience. I had a milestone birthday this year. And you know, that that week was so emotional and I knew what was happening because of, you know, the education and the experience in this line. But on a personal level, the, the grief, it, it just came back full force, even though it's been years and years because of what was happening for me in in my life. And I think having the skills and having that education, it helped. So I was able to, I think, experience both the, the grief as well as the joy. And then it kind of settles back in. But yeah, it just amazes me that it never really is over. But I think you learned to carry it over time. So, myths four and five, I actually kind of felt that these saying the same thing in in different words. So myth 4 is that **grief is only experienced in older people**, and myth 5 is that **children are too young to grieve or understand death**.

Cathy

If children can love, they can grieve. Because, you know, even as babies, they can feel the absence of somebody. So, I disagree that only older people, you

know, you grieve. Children definitely do grieve. It's quite a common myth, though, wouldn't you think, Marianne? You know, that people might be a bit dismissive of children and protective of children, and yet their grief experience can be quite profound. But it can look different to how adults grieve.

Marianne

Yeah. And also, I think you can explain death to a child in a, in an age appropriate way. And, and little children seem to get it, but then after a little while they'll say yes. But are they coming to my birthday party? Oh, OK. They didn't quite get the concept that this is permanent. So it depends, it depends on your age. But I also, I was very touched. Just like, I mean, we know that all mammals grieve and we know that birds grieve as well. But I was very touched to learn last year that blue tongue lizards grieve. So grief, it's not, it's not exclusive to us. It's about attachment, it's about bonding, it's about love. It's the, it's the price we pay for love. And that's also true for blue tongue lizards.

Salomie

You wouldn't think that, but yeah. If you have the capacity to form an attachment, whoever you are, you have the capacity to grieve. Now this next one is a favourite of mine. I get this actually quite often when I tell people I work in grief and loss. And it is. **You must go through the five stages of grief in specific order to heal.**

Marianne

Yeah, it's, it's safe to say that everybody that works in bereavement, it just, it makes us laugh because it's, it's so not true. And I don't know of any bereavement counsellor that uses the five-stage model at all. It's in popular culture, it's in a lot of films and things. So we take that as gospel. But they were developed. They were developed the five stages for people who were terminally ill. And it was about coming to terms with the fact that you yourself would die. And I, I'm not an expert in that area, and that may well be true, but that's the kind of process people went through. But it was never intended even for the terminal to be a linear progression.

Cathy

No, that's right. So, you know, this is the work by Elizabeth Kubler Ross. And we're very grateful for the work that she did because it really did open up the conversation about grief and about a model of grief into the community. And so, you know, particularly for this month being Grief Awareness Month, we still love to get that conversations around death and dying out there. And this is something very effectively of that work that by Elizabeth Kubler Ross and

those five stages did. But the community had latched on to this model as a linear model, as Marianne said, And it's so not true because we can experience all of those things in this this big mess, you know, and so much and so much more. So it was never intended to be a linear model, but that's sort of been the hook that the community members have landed on. And then create consternation if I don't go through those, those set 5 stages, you know, through, you know, you know, through bargaining and through depression and you know, ultimately with acceptance, you know, I'm not grieving properly. I'm not doing it right, you know, but there is no right way to grieve. There's your way, you know?

Marianne

And that, that brings to mind your way, absolutely.

But that what you said then just brought to my mind, you know, different theorists over time have decided to create models. There's a four-phase model, there's a four task model. There's loads of different models of grief and one of them, the four task model, it starts with acceptance. So in that way that the Kubler Ross one ends with acceptance, that's just the very beginning of grief in in other models. So I think, Cathy, I think you're right. We and if a person watching this is thinking, I don't know, should I have bereavement counselling? Are they going to impose some structure and model on me? We just meet you where you are and walk alongside you for your journey. That's exactly right, isn't it?

Cathy

It's about, and not everybody needs a grief counselling like in opening up these conversations about how should I grieve, You know, like most of us can get through our grief journey with the support of, you know, family and friends, you know, but some people do find it advantageous to lean out outside of our family circles about outside of our intimate circles to a space that's objective, you know, like NALAG, like grief line, where I can actually explore my process in a safe and nurturing environment. Or, you know, I can provide assistance, you know, seek out assistance just to have that space of what are my coping strategies? How am I doing? Rather than trying to, you know, fit within this frame of a linear model that I have to go from here to here to here to here to do it right.

Marianne

Well, you know, that's right, That's true. And sometimes you're the rock of the family and everybody leans on you and you're supporting everybody else in

the community and all the kids and all everybody. So I sometimes think that it's the rock of the family that benefits the most from bereavement counselling because you need a space where you can come and get yours while you're supporting everybody else.

Cathy

That's right, because that's often, isn't it, what we explore with them. While you're supporting all these people, who's supporting you?

Salomie

Yeah, yeah. But I think, you know, just to summarize that this part of it, I think people like models and people like that because they want grief to be tidy. We know it's not. And it's hard and it's messy and it's overwhelming. And I think it's just this need for, you know, can we make it tidy? Can we make it linear? Can we make it fit tasks and stages or what not? And maybe it's helpful to some extent to some people, but I think, you know, the reality is that you have to do the hard slog. There's no way out other than through.

Cathy

And the take away too, I think is the installation of hope. I think the take away that these models provide people is reassurance and hope that I will be able to get through this very difficult time.

Marianne

And again, that reminds me that it is something that we do need to get through. And I love there's a quote that says grief is the most patient of emotion. So, when we say not now, I can't deal. I, you know, I'm just going to push that away and push that away. It will wait patiently. Grief's like, OK, I'll just sit here. I'll be waiting. And it can be years later, even decades later, and you'll know that you haven't, you know, you haven't turned your attention to this and you haven't let yourself go through it. And if you don't go through it now, you will have to go through it later.

Cathy

Yes, it will wait for us. Yeah.

Salomie

So mid 7 then **avoid mentioning the deceased to prevent upsetting the bereaved.**

Cathy

I really like to encourage people when they're grieving to introduce me to their loved one. I want to get to know them. I want to provide a safe space for them to talk about their person and with permission, mention them by name. And I wonder if that's when we truly die, when the last person says your name, you know, So I do encourage, I do encourage. I know there can be some cultural sensitivity around that. So it's always with permission. But I do encourage people to talk about their loved ones. And in the acute stage of grief, in an acute phase when you know, the, the, the grief is quite raw and, and new, it can be very painful. So there can be a natural avoidance, but we I think it's really helpful to be able to talk about their loved one to end. People sometimes really welcome the space to do that without, without upsetting others. And, you know, in our objective, because we are objective, you know, it enables that process to happen, which I think is enormously helpful because we're not avoiding, you know, we're not avoiding that that pain.

Marianne

I think, I think it's also, it's natural, isn't it? When you're with someone who's grieving, you think, oh, oh, I don't want to upset them. Oh, my goodness. If I say something, what if they cry? Oh, no. And then they'll be embarrassed. And then I'll be embarrassed. And then it's just all too embarrassing. I'll just pretend I didn't see them and walk on the other side of the street. And I think we're doing so much better as a society and a culture to allow emotions and the expression of emotions and to understand. And we're getting over our embarrassment. And I think we're doing better at saying tell me about your mum. You know, I miss her too. Or I saw something, you know, in the shopper reminded me of her. And yeah. Just opening up that conversation because we do when we're grieving, we need to talk about the person that we've lost and we want to.

Cathy

And I think that avoidance that that people have is about feeling anxious about upsetting, you know, our friend or our relative or our colleague that's, you know, in mourning. And I think as, you know, as people, we are anxious, we will cause more pain and we're anxious in the face of suffering. And so we don't want to upset more. So we avoid, you know, it's our anxiety that comes up. And instead, I think it's so much better to, to say, I know this is really hard. You know, the, I know this is a really hard time for you. I just, I don't even know what to say, you know, But I think it's, it's important that that is much more honest and authentic and the acknowledging and the witnessing of the pain

is so much better than avoidance and crossing the street not to run into them.

Marianne

I remember talking to someone whose daughter had died and at her place of work, nobody mentioned anything. And if something would come up about a daughter, you know, they would say, oh, it's my daughter's birthday. Oh, sorry, sorry. You know, and because they didn't want to remind her that her daughter had died. And she said, I remember every second of my existence that my daughter has died. I'm happy that your daughter is having her birthday. It's not, you can't remind me of this because it's something that I carry very fresh with me. So, it's not people who are grieving are grieving all the time and mentioning things, talking about people. It's not that you're suddenly going to remind them that this has happened because they know it's they're carrying that with them all the time.

Cathy

That's right. And, you know, in supporting people as well, it can be, it can be very difficult then in how they refer to their, you know, deceased loved ones, you know, like if a stranger, how many children do you have, You know, how, how do we respond? Do we want to honour and acknowledge my son or daughter that may be now deceased or, you know, so it's about what feels comfortable for you. Do I want to go there? Do I want to go down into this explanation? But for a lot of families, they want to they want to, you know, they want to be able to say, I have three children, you know, maybe you know, one has died, maybe one's in heaven. But they want to be an acknowledgement that they existed, that they were loved and they are still loved and very important part of their life. So yes, we do need to say their names.

Salomie

And I just want to add to that, like even for me, I lost my sister. But if somebody mentions her today, it's like they've given me a gift because I'm not the only one that remembers her. Somebody else does. And when they share their memories of her, that is, is, is so precious. Like there's nothing better that you could give me.

Cathy

That's right. That gives me goosebumps. Salomie. Because that is so true, isn't it? You know, the opportunity to be able to talk about our beautiful people that we've loved and lost, you know, is, is, is a gift.

Salomie

And that's, it's, I think it's important for people to be aware that, you know, and, and to see it in that sense that you could be potentially giving somebody a gift just by mentioning their loved one who has died.

So Myth 8, **keeping busy is the only way to cope with grief.**

Cathy

The only way. So, the only way. Certainly, that's certainly not true. You know, there's many different coping strategies out there. What works for one person may not necessarily work for the other. Certainly when we are first in those raw weeks and months of early grief, it might be difficult for us to sort of engage in our normal life in our changed world. And for some people, the distraction of keeping busy might be an effective coping strategy for them. But I think as Marianne mentioned earlier, our grief is there. It is ongoing. It will wait for us. We can put it down, pick it up, but it's still an ongoing experience. So keeping busy. What you know, what we do encourage is trying to look at how the grief impacts on our basic activities of daily living. You know, we know that grief initially can lead to sleep disturbance and appetite disturbance, you know, into questioning about life and, and impact us in so many, many different ways. But I think it's about then what works for me. Am I allowing some time for reflection? Am I able to be active in the way of, you know, being able to engage in exercise? You know, things like walking the dog is, you know, is such a wonderful activity because it forces us to go out and care to move, to be able to do all those things. So, you know, when I'm supporting people in those early stages of grief, I'm checking in on how they have been impacted, you know, in their grief reactions in those activities of daily living. But I will also to look at what are their coping strategies, you know, in the keeping busy, what you know, I want to soften that and explore that. What does that mean? Is it keeping busy by avoiding my grieving experience? Am I just engaging in my normal routine and in a space of, of trying to just push it away? Or am I keeping busy with actively mourning and doing some really healthy coping strategies? So it's very different. I if I would say that keeping busy was the only strategy, I would disagree strongly. It's certainly not the only strategy. It's about what are the coping strategies that work for me.

Marianne

You know, I, I have the worst coping strategy when I'm grieving, which is cake. You know, I just because people tend to bring you cake. I think that's and, and that's really what you feel like eating is cake. And in that very early period, that

seems fine, but you don't want to go on just eating cake forever. So there's moments where different things come into play. What I really loved what you said, Cathy, I'm, I'm just going to add, things have changed a little bit and we now can distract ourselves on our phone. You know, so often times we'll just be scrolling, scrolling through YouTube, scrolling through social media, lot of scrolling. And it's a very easy distraction. But what we now know from the brain science is that distraction through your phone doesn't process emotion, though your feeling is overwhelm of emotions. And to cope with it, you go on your phone to distract yourself. But the emotions are still there. They're still trapped inside you. And oddly enough, one of the best ways to process your very huge emotions from grief is doing something with both hands where your mind is idle. So, you can cope with grief by knitting, by wading, by chopping the vegetables. It's just this sort of it doesn't have to be, doesn't have to be crying, doesn't have to be throbbing or anything. It can actually while you're knitting their emotions are being worked through and when you if, if you can get some sleep while you're dreaming as well. Emotions, yes.

Cathy

And being out in nature, you know, I'm, you know, I'm very interested in that healing aspect of connection to Mother Nature. So gardening, growing something, going for walks, you know, going for walks on the beach, just being able to go to a park and sitting down on the grass or lying in your own backyard and looking at the clouds. Just having some of that space where we're mindfully observing and noticing. I think it can be a wonderful environment to enable us to allow the motions to be identified and to surface and then to be felt and expressed. You know, so I've, I've passionately, you know, encourage people if they in their grief process to try to get out in, in nature in some form of what's accessible to you.

Salomie

Thank you. There's some great coping strategies there with, you know, getting out sleeping and activities that keep our hands busy. That's something I'm sure a lot of people would be, would be glad to know. And, you know, for the caution of how much time we spend on our phones. Thank you for that. So myth 9 is, I feel like we've kind of addressed it already and I'm just being mindful of our time as well. Myth 9 was **that grief should be resolved within a year**, but I feel like we've spoken to that in saying that there is no timeline and it takes as long as it takes. So we might just move on straight away to our last.

Marianne

No, I'm just going to jump in and say I remember my friend, her grandfather died and she was upset and her, another person said to her, but that was three months ago, but you should be over that now. It was three months ago. So it does persist, doesn't it, in the community that these things should be resolved very quickly.

Salomie

Yeah. The one year mark. I don't know why we landed on that particular time period, but a lot of people do tend to think that after a year you should be back to normal or back to your old self. And that's really not true because you're the self without this person that you loved and was now dead.

Cathy

I think too, there's that aspect of going through all of those things the first time, you know, all of those celebrations and milestones, whether it's birthday, wedding anniversary, Christmas, Easter, Mother's Day, Father's Day, you know, it's going through all of those sort of markers of time for a year and celebrations within our family and inner circles, you know, without their loved one. And I think there's a sort of an expectation that the first year will be the hardest year. And then I get to that first anniversary. And then, and is it a sense of leaving them behind? You know, I've now got to move on, you know, let go some of those old, you know, expectations in our community, when in fact there's the realization as I navigate that first year and that first anniversary can be very difficult time for people that are grieving, but then they move forward in their life and you know, they're having to then negotiate. This is the way my life is. You know, their, their reality is, is really honed in, I think, and there's that, that trying to relocate their loved ones from, you know, this physical presence and involvement in my life to then this emotional ongoing connection that I have through my grief, you know, as a continuing bond or through my ritual. So that first year is really quite significant. And I think there is a an expectation in community that it gets easier if I can just get through that first year, you know, I'll be OK. And maybe for some people, that is so. But it is an expectation that I think that, you know, it can be difficult because they wake up the day after the 1st anniversary. And, you're feeling that the grief hasn't magically evaporated. It's still there with me, you know.

Salomie

Yeah. And, you know, we're moving quite nicely into our final myth with that.

Moving on with life means you've forgotten about the person who's died.

Marianne

I, I, I can say that this is a, a real fear that people can have a real fear that they won't, they can't picture their face and their mind anymore I've forgotten what they look like. I've forgotten and it's very distressing. And I think sometimes we can get stuck in our grieving because we think it's a, it's a disrespect. And if I, if I move forward and if I go through this process, I'm, I'm disrespecting that person and the bond that we had. And it, it can be, it can be very challenging.

Salomie

And I think maybe along with disrespect, it also feels like being disloyal. They're not here. How can I, you know, be happy again? How can I laugh?

Marianne

That's a better word. I think disloyal is the word. Or that feeling that I'm not. Yeah, exactly. I shouldn't laugh. I shouldn't have happy moments. There shouldn't be glimmers of joy in my life because that's disloyal to the disease.

Cathy

It's about challenging those feelings of guilt that come up, isn't it? Because, you know, it's a case of their life story is ongoing. You know, there there's more chapters to be lived. And, you know, I think now the focus of our grief support work is about remembering is the encouragement to remember not to forget. You know, perhaps 40 years ago they have been, you know, encouraging our loved ones to be stoic and, you know, to let go and to move on. And it's about severing the bond in order to heal and recover. But we don't feel that way now. We've our feelings now in the support is an acknowledgement to remember to, you know, our grief process is a is a opportunity for transformation of that relationship. And so we want to move into a space that I have a continuing bond with that person of whatever that might look like for me. If that's the way that I want that I continue to love, I might honour that through a you know, a visit to the cemetery might be talking to a photo. It might be sharing stories with our family. We might have some traditions or rituals, like a favourite meal, you know, or watching the football together, still barracking for that favourite team.

It might be introducing the grandchildren to, you know, lost grandparents through photos and stories, you know, talking about personalities and interests and passions. You know, the legacy still goes on. So the focus is very

much on remembering, not on forgetting in order to heal in our changed world.

Marianne

And there's a lot of work, isn't there, with children creating memory boxes and memory jazz and trying to remember. Like if the mum dies, it's like, what was Mummy's favourite song? What was Mummy's perfume? What was Mummy's favourite TV show? And you can write them down and draw pictures and pop them in the memory box. And then when a child is worried that they're forgetting, you can just get them out. And so that's right, that was Mummy's favorite song.

Cathy

That's right. There's that reassurance that she's always still there in your heart going forward. So it's love.

Salomie

But that was wonderful. Cathy and Marianne, thank you both so much for these incredible insights that you've shared. I'm sure it'll benefit a lot of people that are going to watch this to, to know there's no right or wrong way to grieve. And you know, what works for you is the best way for you. So thank you both very much for your time.

Cathy

You're welcome. Thank you, Salomie.