

# LIVING WITH CHANGE

**ALEX JAMES** examines how the simple change that bereavement brings can be as traumatic as the emotions of loss and grief

With a house move seeming very likely in the next couple of months I've been trying to put my life in order. This began with me finally addressing the three large cases I have been dragging around since I left my first marriage - 30 years' worth of photographs, cards, and of course our children's first drawings, school books favourite toys etc. I spent a whole day going through this stuff and trying to be ruthless, but it's so hard to part with the past sometimes, isn't it? And how do we choose which bits to keep and which to let go of? I'm reminded now as I write this of the many items of clothing I've sent to charity or binned, only to wish I hadn't some years later, perhaps kidding myself that a particular dress I wore in the eighties might still look good now.

On a more serious note - and before I lose track completely - as I looked through the photos so many memories came to mind: faces of those who at different stages of my life held importance, some no longer in touch and, yes, some no longer on the mortal plane. This led me to think about what an amazing tool memory is and how many memories are recalled and emotions evoked simply by looking at old momentos.

With so many losses it is a hard job choosing the bits to keep that mean the most. What about when choice isn't ours? What about when we are left with massive uncontrollable change, like the death of a close loved one?

I remember a client telling me how she felt after the sudden death of her loved one in fact her description seemed so captivating of the experience that I have quoted it many times:

'Once I had a puzzle, a picture complete. I knew its shape and colour; I planned its future and its size. Suddenly it's as though someone has taken everything I knew and shaken it up in the air and now I am left with pieces - some of them familiar but they

no longer fit as they did. Parts are missing and it can never be the same again.'

Without choice we can feel that nothing is within our control, and, when we are bereaved, that sense of losing control extends itself to many areas of our lives. We become vulnerable and indecisive, uncertain of our decisions. Any plans we may have made if death were anticipated may now seem unrealistic or may not fit with the way we feel. Where death has occurred suddenly or unexpectedly the shock and unreality may leave us incapable of considered thinking for a time and yet there we are, forced to make really important choices - permanent choices.

Sometimes there's a belief that once the funeral is out of the way it will be easier, like some sudden illness to be gotten over. However, the reality is that death does change everything and though we cannot fix or prevent it we can learn how best to communicate with the bereaved. We are all individuals and our experience of life and death are as individual and unique as we are. How we manage any situation depends, not only on our current emotional capacity, but on other aspects and influences at the time. True understanding of others comes not from your own experiences but from your ability to be with them to hear, to empathise, to take all that they have to say and to accept their words as they are and avoiding the urge to interpret them by our own measure or judgement.

The stages of grief have been written about many times. I sometimes wonder how useful it is to refer to grief as though there is a strict guide to follow. People often ask me whether I think they are doing it right and follow this by saying: 'Because I think I ought to be over it by now.' I spend much of my time confirming that there is only one way and that is their own way. Each person's passage towards grief management is unique to them and this management will mean a different

thing to each of us. What is needed is reassurance, acceptance, a genuine listening ear, confirmation that, yes! grief can be crazy, that, yes! it can feel like you've lost control, that you'll never get over it and that this is how it is.

I encourage those that I am supporting to react in any way they feel they need to. Begin the day, breathe in and out and take baby steps, don't rush to do things or make hasty decisions. Take your time, keeping a journal can be very useful - writing to your deceased loved one can give a reflective space, a continued bond.

Whilst working in palliative care with my team of supportive care workers we developed ways of remembering and continuing bond. These included journaling, scrapbooking and storytelling all giving space to connect with the feelings of loss and grief. Encouraging the bereaved to take control if only in a small way by saying 'No' and avoiding pressure from well-meaning folk to 'help sort things out for you - this alongside saying 'Yes' and accepting help or asking for what you need when you need it. Letting feelings emerge gives release. Crying can feel scary for some people - several have told me they fear if they cry they'll never stop. No one ever cried forever and letting out emotion is healthier than sitting on it and suddenly exploding uncontrollably.

Being a front liner, as a funeral director it's likely you are the first outsider to encounter the newly bereaved, and your facilitation of their experience - the way you use the space with them - may make all the difference to their journey towards manageability. I hope that this article will give you some added insight into the disorientation of the bereaved and their challenges of living with change.

Alex James MBACP is a professional bereavement counsellor/consultant, agony aunt and author who has worked with bereaved individuals and families for many years. Visit [www.bereavement.co.uk](http://www.bereavement.co.uk) to find out more.