

BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT

Remembering Abi: How Lucy Hone lives with the loss of her daughter

Two years ago, on Queen's Birthday weekend, our funny and beautiful 12-year-old daughter, Abi, was suddenly killed in a tragic road accident. Alongside her died her best friend, Ella, and Ella's mum, Sally, who was also a dear friend of mine. Dead, gone, no more. A single second of motorized madness snuffing out decades of precious life. It made no sense at all.

At the time we chose not to speak to the media – our grief too raw to say anything coherent, our need for privacy fierce. But in the weeks and months that followed I started writing and a need to share our story and bereavement experience crept up on me. Prompted initially by my frustration at the limited usefulness of the grief resources available to us, it was further exacerbated by well-meaning people making us aware we were now prime candidates for divorce, family estrangement, and mental illness.

Then came the warnings that we should expect to write off five years to misery and malfunctioning. Aside from informing us that grief was individual (an experience 'as unique as your own fingerprint') the literature we were given extensively listed the long and varied symptoms we were likely to endure, giving me the impression we were now passive participants on a long, miserable journey....

As an academic researcher working in the field of resilience psychology, that advice was insufficient for me. I knew there was no dodging grief, and that it would suck – on so many levels, frequently, profoundly and enduringly – but the tone of these messages immediately struck me as too passive. I felt so helpless over Abi's death, I was in desperate need to take control over my grieving.

Instead of playing the victim in this tragedy, I wanted evidenced-based strategies to support us through this time. I wanted literature detailing how to foster healing and maintain healthy functioning, even while we grieved. At that time I had no idea if such a thing was possible but I was determined to find out. And I was surprised by what I found.

....And so began my journey to uncover the other side of darkness: to discover that, in fact, most marriages that suffer the loss of a child do not end in divorce; that most people demonstrate resilience in the face of bereavement, maintaining healthy functioning while grieving; and, even more crucially for me over these past two years, that we do not need to be passive passengers in our grief – research has identified several strategies that help us adapt to the loss.

Now I feel compelled to share these findings for the benefit of others like me. Grief is, after all, a life experience common to us all. I want to inform the bereaved that all is not lost: just that we can manage to grieve, and live, simultaneously. It's not easy, it does require constant effort, and there are certainly times when I succumb to the waves of grief, but by looking at new studies, and talking to others, I have also found things we can do to exert control over how we negotiate the adjustments to life: ways to think and act that make it more manageable. I still cry often, but I've learned to laugh in between tears.

For instance, it used to be accepted wisdom that successfully adapting to the loss of a loved one required us to sever our bonds with the dead; there was no moving on until we'd done so. But contemporary bereavement research suggests the opposite to be true: the bereaved who somehow manage to cultivate an ongoing connection with the dead seem to grieve more easily. Tom Attig, who has written and taught extensively about death, bereavement, and grieving, believes that the key to effective grieving lies in making the transition from loving someone in the present to loving them in their absence. "We can continue to 'have' what we have 'lost', that is, a continuing, albeit transformed, love for the deceased."

We have not truly lost our years of living with the deceased or our memories. Nor have we lost their influences, the inspirations, the values, and the meanings embodied in their lives. We can actively incorporate these into new patterns of living." In other words, we can work out what their legacy is.

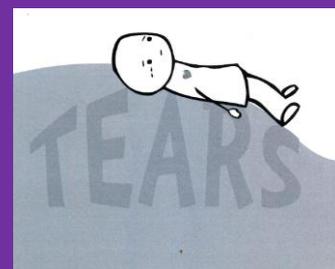
I won't say that working out our Abi's own particular legacy – the ways she shaped us, the impact her short life has had on us – has been easy, but it has helped me in her loss. Considering it now, I realise I have developed several different methods of keeping Abi a part of my life.

Firstly, I have certain rituals that remind me of her. I wrap my wet hair up in her old Barbie towel after swimming, just as she used to, I wear her necklace when I need extra strength, we continue to celebrate her birthday at the same spot on the beach each year, surrounded by her friends and eating B.B.Q. Kettle chips in her honor. When I spy something that reminds me of her, that I know she would love, I post a photo on Instagram, accompanied by the hashtag #abiwouldhavelovedthis – an idea picked up from the fantastic online grief forum, What's Your Grief. <http://www.whatsyourgrief.com/>

*“Life is
changed not
ended”*

*“They that love beyond
the world cannot be
separated by it. Death
cannot kill what never
dies.”*

(William Penn)



*“Life can only be
understood backwards;
but it must be lived
forwards”*

(Soren Kierkegaard)

*“Death does
not end our
story...
Death does not
end our
relationships”*



Similarly, I have developed rituals to remind me of Sally. At Christmas time I made a wreath out of wild foliage, gathered in her memory. Each weekend I wander down the lane, secateurs in hand, plucking odd bits of greenery, grapenuts and wild berries to place in a jam jar back in my kitchen – the process and the outcome both keeping her present in our everyday lives. I frequently walk out to the local headland she loved to run on – giving me time and space to think of her. I bake her recipes, treasuring her handwritten notes.

Keeping some of Abi's things around the house has also helped. I simply don't feel the need to eradicate all evidence of her from our lives – so her little girl sunglasses still hang from the rear view mirror of Trevor's truck, ladybug hairgrips sit alongside mine in the bathroom cupboard, I snuggle up to watch TV in the fluffy pyjama jacket I bought for her last birthday. We had her most-loved sweatshirt and two winter jerseys turned into cushions, and are in the process of framing precious scribbled notes she wrote to her brothers and us. I have a notebook she gave me, a cup she painted, the pillowcases from her bed. It's not much I know, but her presence shines through these often-used items, and the regular practice of gathering in Sally's memory keeps us connected.

Please, don't think me in denial. I am not. I just don't see the need to rid our family home – her home – of every last possession when they bring me comfort and remind me that yes, I did have a daughter, her presence was real, not imaginary, and she brought so much joy to my life.

American researchers Michael Norton and Francesca Gino have demonstrated, through a series of studies, that creating personalised, frequently practiced, rituals significantly helps the bereaved persons adjust with loss. Their research shows that, far from being public or religious performances, bereavement rituals are more commonly everyday acts, conducted in private, designed to connect us to the dead. Their work suggests that engaging in rituals helps restore a sense of control and order at a time when we feel so utterly powerless; these deliberately controlled gestures help counteract the turbulence and chaos that comes with loss. What's more, they say that practicing such rituals has been shown to reduce negative emotions while increasing positive ones. Hooray for that.

In short, rituals provide something of a long-term solution, enabling us to grieve and maintain normal functioning simultaneously. They are the answer to moving forward while retaining the dead in our lives.

In terms of her personal legacy, I have pondered what Abi taught us long and hard. What did we learn from having her in our lives for such an agonisingly short time? Addressing such weighty philosophical questions is regarded as a very normal part of grieving in today's bereavement literature. The fact that death (particularly sudden death) frequently induces a crisis of meaning is well understood. How do we go on living in a world where such things can happen? How do we incorporate such tragic events into our personal life stories?

My own way, like any other grieving mother, is unique. If I can channel my professional skills and personal experience to help others manage with grief, then that goes some way to comforting me; to dragging something useful from the terrible loss we have all felt since the deaths of Abi, Ella and Sally. Staying miserable forever was just not an option for me. I have two beautiful teenage boys to live and care for, and a voice in my head urging me not to "lose what you have to what you have lost". These things propelled me to assume an active role on this terrible journey of grief.

Ultimately, I chose life, not death and hope to help others do the same.

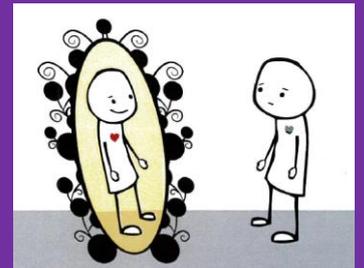
<http://www.essentialkids.com.au/health/health-wellbeing/remembering-abi-how-lucy-hone-lives-with-the-loss-of-her-daughter-20160530-gp7bc1>

Acknowledgement for the cartoons: *The Little Book of Loss & Grief* <https://lizcrowe.org/books/>



For further information please contact Patricia Thomas, Bereavement Consultant on (02) 9649 6423 or email patriciat@catholiccemeteries.com.au or visit www.catholiccemeteries.com.au

“Life is changed not ended”



“Life is eternal; and love is immortal; and death is only a horizon; and a horizon is nothing save the limit of our sight.”
(Rossiter W Raymond)

“Death does not end our story... Death does not end our relationships”

“You would know the secret of death. But how shall you find it unless you seek it in the heart of life?”
(Kahlil Gibran)