



**It's Lonely
Down Here:
Finding My
Way Through
Grief**

CHAPTER 1:

It's Lonely Down Here

My father died when I was eighteen and the grief that I was plunged into took me many years to unravel and understand. I think this was in part because our relationship was complicated, and partly because at the age at which it happened, I was totally unequipped with the tools I needed to deal with such an event. Our relationship was complicated for a number of reasons. One was that he was my step dad who I had taken many years to be able to call “dad.” Secondly, he was an alcoholic who frequently relapsed, and the third was that and he had already almost completely disappeared from my life by the time I was 15. When I say disappeared I mean in it more than one way. He disappeared physically because he was often in rehab, or my mum had decided he was too out of control to live with us anymore, and he disappeared emotionally because either he was drinking or he was concentrating on his abstinence so much that it kept him from being able to be really present.

Looking at it that way you could say that I was already grieving him before he died. I was grieving a father figure who was not “there” to provide the support and guidance that I needed. Of course, at the time I didn't really see any of that. I loved him and I felt that he loved me. He wasn't at all an abusive alcoholic, just sad, and he was one of the funniest people I knew. Family life was full of laughs and jokes. And so, I felt his passing as a huge loss.

The way I found out about his death also had a big impact on how much I grieved. Seven months after the last time I saw him, I was visiting a friend and she casually dropped into the conversation, “Did you hear that he died?” It was a horrendous. It was a moment of instant pain and shock that made it seem like the whole world had changed. I remember feeling it in my whole body. My friend had said this to me so casually with no warning whatsoever. She had read it in the local newspaper. I was so frozen by it I don't think I even responded to her.

I went home and told my mum, and she went out and bought the paper, which confirmed it: he was gone. She just said to me, “He's never coming back. He probably committed suicide, as he was so unhappy.”

The really difficult thing was the silence that followed. I am sure my family cared deeply about this tragic news, but no one I knew at the time had any idea of how to deal with something like that. I guess they thought that talking about it would just be more upsetting for everyone. Unfortunately, this silence and lack of ability to process what had happened meant that I slowly sank into a deep depression. Every time somebody asked me what was wrong with me, I said I didn't know, and it was true, I didn't. I didn't have the vocabulary to express what I felt and I didn't have any idea what I needed to feel better. Looking back, I recognise that I was also in a state of freeze/fight/flight. So very often I would just freeze and not talk at all. In my mind, I would think, "My dad has died," but somehow, I thought it sounded too silly for me to say out loud. Because the people around me didn't respond or validate my quite normal reaction to grief it made me think that maybe I didn't have the right to feel so bad. And the fact that he wasn't my biological dad made me feel even more that I didn't have the right to feel this grief. So, I tried to move on with my life without processing any of it. I tried to block out my negative thoughts and feelings. Of course, this was an impossible task and I became plagued by intrusive thoughts that I couldn't get rid of, including blaming myself for his apparent suicide.

I couldn't talk about it to anyone. No one seemed to understand the numbness I was feeling. I was travelling down a deep black hole. Each day I was losing a bit more of myself, and my thoughts were just of blaming myself. My mum was worrying so much, and my brother started doing badly at school, all because of me, or so I thought, and everyday got worse and worse.

I'd like to point out here that my mum did notice I was unhappy and did try to reach out to me and to ask her friends to come and talk to me. In her desperation to try and find a solution she encouraged me to see a GP who was also kind and supportive. But unfortunately, the message I really needed to hear didn't reach me until many many years later.

Grief is a sense of powerlessness created by losing something. I felt vulnerable, unsafe and powerless because an important person in my life who I looked to for support was suddenly gone. Of course, I wasn't going to be able to ignore that feeling of lack of safety and carry on as normal, but that is what it felt like the world wanted me to do. I wish someone

had looked me right in the eyes and validated what I was feeling, normalised it and told me that my reaction was totally common. Perhaps then I might have allowed myself to feel the feelings and work through them instead of trying to push them away. Overcoming grief is about slowly regaining a sense of power and control over your life so that you can once again feel safe, physically and emotionally. It takes time, but it starts with simply acknowledging that you have in fact lost that power and understanding what effects it can have on you.

There is immense power in normalising and validating someone's feelings when they are grieving. It can relieve someone of a huge pressure to act like they are OK when they are not, or get over something in someone else's timeframe. If we don't do this, as I ultimately discovered, we can turn a normal grieving process into someone with more prolonged complex grief. Deeply buried grief can be so much harder to process if you have spent years squashing or denying your feelings, because that action to squash everything can become such a habit that you don't even realise you are doing it.

The most important thing I learned is that our feelings are little entities that are there to try to tell us something, and if we ignore them, they are not going to go away. Now, I think about my feelings as a little internal email service. Someone is trying to send me a message! I need to take time to read that message and see if it is something I need to act on or not. Sometimes the message is that I am tired and need to rest more. Sometimes it is that I need to be more wary and guarded over a possible threat. As soon as I have acknowledged the message, the feeling starts to disappear. I no longer take those messages and throw them away like I used to.

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