

Grief and loss – a personal story of pushing the fish hook through.

My mum passed away just over a year ago, and my dad died two years before that. I'd previously read about grief, but the lived experience was unlike anything I could have imagined.

For months after my parents died I had a very strong sense of unease. Sometimes I was sad. Other times very irritable and short tempered. And for much of the time I had an ill-defined sense that all was not well. I knew I was out of sorts, and I also knew that this was a feeling that I had never experienced before. It was unchartered territory, and very unpleasant in part because of this newness.

A few months after my mum died I had a very vivid and powerful dream. In the dream I had a fish hook caught in my finger. I pulled and pulled to get it out. Pulling against it hurt a lot, and it didn't seem to help at all – the hook was stuck. I still remember the chilling awareness I had the moment I realised that the only way this hook was coming out was by me pushing it through my finger. It was frightening to realise that I would have to cause myself more pain in order to be free of this hook. It seemed both counter-intuitive and terrifying (I'm not good with pain it seems).

I also realised that now was not the time to attempt this dreadful procedure. My finger was swollen and tender from my attempts to pull the hook back out the way it had gone in. I needed to let it settle for a bit, to let the swelling and soreness subside. And I knew that I would also need a kind and wise helper to support me through this delicate procedure. The prospect of pushing the fish hook through my finger was overwhelming, and I couldn't imagine facing that task alone.

When I woke up I knew I had been dreaming about my grief. The dream gave me permission to bandage up my grief for now, and attend to it later when the pain and swelling was less intense. I also had an awareness that I couldn't keep this painful injury bandaged up forever. At some stage I would have to push the fish hook through. But with a helper (or helpers) this was an achievable task – not pleasant perhaps, but also not unbearable.

In the early stages of my grief my "fish hook" throbbed, and if it got bumped the pain was terrible. Bandaging it up gave some protection from these accidental bumps. I stopped doing counselling work for almost a year. I reduced my study commitments, and fortunately my employer also helped by scaling back my workload. And when I felt stronger I organised more joyful things in my life.

On writing this now (a year down the track) it feels like the fish hook is still there, but the swelling and soreness has largely gone, and I am slowly pushing it through. I am grateful that the uncomfortable and ill-defined sense of unease has also largely subsided.

I am conscious of the risk of giving advice based on my own experience. Everyone is unique, and each of us have to find our own path. But I wonder if there are some lessons about grief from my experience that might be applicable to others:

- That it is "normal" to feel out of sorts and not know why;
- The importance of self care and being gentle with oneself in the early stages of grief; and
- The wisdom of protecting oneself from painful thoughts and memories in the short-term, but also not relying on this as a long-term strategy. My sense is that eventually the fish hook needs to be gently eased through and out.

This last point is not intended to be read as an advertisement for counselling, although for some that might be helpful. My experience is that gently revisiting memories of my parents (for example looking at family photos) has helped to slowly push the fish hook through, as has talking to family and friends.

If you are in the early stages of grief I hope my story gives you hope that the fog will slowly clear.