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A bit of outside help

Grief has a **profound effect** on our bodies. Taking it into nature offers **better healing in the long term** than shutting it away, says **Ruth Allen**

IF YOU haven't experienced a **significant loss** in your life, then you are one of the lucky ones. If you have – be it a **spouse**, **child** or **close friend** – then you probably already know how it can feel like losing your mind. Which, in some ways, you are.

In her extensive grief research, Mary-Frances O'Connor explains that when we experience a **profound loss**, our brains have to begin a lengthy process of rewiring all of the pathways and predictions they made based on a **loved one's presence**, gradually switching over to an understanding of their absence. It can take years for our bodies to make sense of loss as we navigate continual **yearning while** adapting to a new way of life.

And it isn't just our brain chemistry turned upside down, but our whole bodies too. Research shows that grief increases our **heart rate** and **blood pressure**, makes us more prone to heart attacks and raises the risk for **cardiovascular disease**, **infections**, **inflammation**, **cancer** and **chronic diseases** like **diabetes**. Closeness to our loved ones is protective against all sorts of external stresses in everyday life, but when they are gone, we are more likely to feel exposed to what life throws at us, causing a flood of stress hormones that affect our cardiovascular and immune systems.

This should encourage us to give our grieving the space and support it deserves, rather than shutting it away and avoiding it. A 2022 report by the UK Commission



ELAINE KNOX

on Bereavement highlighted that we need to do a lot better in how we support grief at home, in schools and in the workplace. Too often, we don't know how to talk about grief, how to support the bodies of those **grieving** or how to show **compassion** for ourselves and each other. In many ways, we are still wed to the idea that **grief progresses** in stages towards an endpoint, as psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross famously formulated. However, the idea that we might pass through steps in a linear fashion only exerts undue pressure to "move on".

In reality, grief moves in cycles and is never "done", which is why, as an outdoor psychotherapist, I am passionate about getting people outside to tend to their grief in a non-judgemental environment where the **circularity of life** and death, joy and sadness, is the norm.

In the shifting landscape of grief, what we need is solid ground on which to learn how to function anew without **intrusion** from the demands of our busy, indoor lives. Time outside promotes mindfulness, allowing the griever to anchor themselves in the soothing senses of nature.

It offers **solitude** and **space** for contemplation, a soundscape that is ambient and restorative, something beautiful to focus on other than our loss. Getting outside often dials down the feelings of rumination and despair that grief ramps up, even if just for a short while.

There isn't yet much research on nature-based support for grieving people specifically, but there is an abundance of research on the physiological benefits of **connecting with nature** that can usefully counter many of the impacts of grief. Time outside lowers our blood pressure and the production of **stress hormones**, reduces **inflammation** and decreases the **risk of heart disease**. So it is an intuitive pairing to take our grieving bodies outside.

Grief isn't pathological and doesn't often require medication, but it is something we all need support for in the long term and can learn to be a **better companion** for others in. Bereavement is so ubiquitous that it is vital we learn how to tend to it using the resources we have around us. It is crucial that our **green sanctuary** spaces and green social projects are invested in, for their own sake, but also for this most human experience that we will all face, one way or another. ■



Ruth Allen is the author of *Weathering: How the Earth's deep wisdom can help us endure life's storms*