



“It’s like a window that will simply open of its own accord. The room goes cold, and we can do nothing but shiver. But it opens a little less each time, and a little less and one day we wonder what has become of it.” *Memoirs of a Geisha* by Arthur Golden

Coming to terms with loss

Anne Pettigrew discusses how homeopathy can be used to help people face up to the death of loved ones

Grief is among the most difficult of human sufferings that we all have to face. Before I discovered the joys of homeopathy I found grieving patients the most difficult to treat. Now I am pleased to say I know of

many homeopathic medicines which help alleviate the anguish of grief. The pain of loss can be caused by missed opportunity or an unfaithful lover, but none can compare with the bereavement experienced after the death of a close friend or relative. The

following case illustrates that a heavy heart can last for many years, silently concealed, and can cause physical illness as well.

Jean was 74. She came complaining of severe pain from the middle of her back to her thigh and knee. It could make her gasp at times and was burning and excruciating. Heat helped to alleviate the pain as well as pressure and massage. She felt worse when moving and had been treated by a physiotherapist to no avail.

Orthopaedic experts labelled the problem “wear and tear”, but offered no solution. She had also had investigations for upper tummy pain and burping, particularly when anxious. All tests were negative. She had tried treating herself with Rhus tox and many conventional pain killers, none of which had helped. She had had both backache and stomach pain in the past, though never simultaneously and she was on medication for an under-active thyroid.

My first impression of her was how sad and thin she looked. Jean’s general symptoms were as confusing as her specific ones. She was a bit chilly but didn’t like hot weather. She didn’t enjoy her food apart from fruit and chocolate and she was always thirsty, preferring lemon juice and cold water. She slept only on her left side but was waking hourly with the pain.

She seemed anxious to please with her answers to my questions but was also rather guarded. She rarely went out now, admitted no interest in company and read books when she could be bothered. The trigger to her story of grief was the simple question,

why did she not go out now?

Her brother-in-law had died. He and his wife used to accompany Jean and her husband everywhere, holidays included. She had not thought before about dying, but now she was discouraged and despondent. She was only living for her grandchildren. She kept her sadness from her husband, felt she was bad company and so kept away from people.

Before her pains she had worked actively for charity and was "very sensitive" to the suffering of others. She had lived a full life. Now she had trouble concentrating and being her usual responsible, organised self. She was anxious about trifles and had lost confidence.

This change in personality seemed a very extreme reaction to the death of someone who was not even a blood relative or spouse. I had never seen such misery for so prolonged a time in a patient of her age, previously showing no tendency to depression.

She admitted no other physical symptoms apart from a tendency to a runny nose and an occasional bout of cystitis. However, when I asked Jean about operations and pregnancies, she thought for a long time. With faltering voice she unfolded a story which moved me greatly and made me realise the depth of her grief, submerged for 34 years. She had never discussed how she felt; she thought no one would be interested and in those days she had felt chastised for her grief.

Jean had given birth to a child with incurable medical problems who had been taken to a hospital miles from her home. As she had a toddler to care for, she could not visit.

The baby had died, aged twelve weeks, and the staff of the hospital had seemed surprised that Jean had wanted to see the child to say goodbye. She had been left alone in a sluice room with the baby in a metal tray. Since then, not a day had gone past when she hadn't thought about this child and what might have been. She grieved in silence. When she had tried to speak of it once, a friend had told her it was best not to talk about it.

The loss of a child she had never held was a wound which had never properly healed. The death of her brother-in-law had re-opened the scar. The window in the Japanese metaphor had never closed. However, homeopathy edged it shut.

This lady had many features of that wonderful grief remedy, Natrum muriaticum. I even learned that craving lemon was attributed to it as well as chocolate. Within days of taking the medicine she was sleeping soundly and noted that she felt more optimistic. Her pains eased and her consumption of pain killers was dramatically reduced. She had cried and discussed the dead child with her husband instead of weeping alone as she had done before. After a few months and some high potency doses of Natrum muriaticum she was going out for meals and had arranged a holiday with her husband.

Jean suffered an extreme case of grief, but there are many homeopathic medicines which can be easily used in the early stages of grief. Aconite is the remedy for shock, and Ignatia is unsurpassed to reduce the awful weeping and inappropriate laughter that

afflicts some at this difficult time. If patients have prolonged symptoms it can be a challenge to choose a remedy and professional advice should be sought. Without specialist knowledge it can be difficult to decide amongst the many remedies listed under Grief in the repertory.

Examples include the exhausted, apathetic and forgetful picture of Phosphoric acid and the paralysing numbness after a traumatic loss of those who may benefit from homeopathic Opium, one of the few homeopathic remedies only available on prescription.

Compassionate friends may recognise the stages of a grieving process by instinct: the numb shock, the denial, the guilt about something the bereaved could have done to prevent the death. It seems a pity to me that so often we are all too busy to understand and support bereaved friends and neighbours.



If people show signs of remaining stuck in one stage of grieving or repress their grief or do not re-awaken to the joys of life, we should be ready to steer them towards medical help. We must also hope that medical help will include homeopathic remedies. They can be wonderfully helpful in such situations as Jean would certainly agree.

Anne Pettigrew MFHom, a West of Scotland GP for 22 years, has found homeopathy invaluable in her practice especially in women's health and psychiatry. Patients appreciate its low cost and lack of side effects.

Anne is also GP representative on the Council of the Faculty of Homeopathy and a regular columnist with *Doctor* magazine.