

Good grief... or how to laugh about death

Kat Brown meets comic Cariad Lloyd, whose podcast about coping with loss has become a huge word-of-mouth hit

When my aunt and my friend died of cancer within months of each other, I saw how different families dealt with tragedy. My friend's lot opened up with long, laughing lunches. The vicar came round. There was wine, and memories, and hugs. My family, in contrast, spiralled down into very private shells of grief that were rarely shared or opened. When the top occasionally came off, it was like someone screaming very loudly for a moment, before being hidden away again.

My way of dealing with it was to try to fix cancer. Being a scientifically illiterate entertainment journalist, I signed up to volunteer on a palliative care ward at Guy's Hospital in London Bridge. I was one of the only civilians there; everyone else was a medical student and thus knew that palliative care means the patients will not recover. And yet still I arrived every week, convinced that two hours of reading, talking, and wielding of a tea trolley would somehow make everyone better, and help me process my grief. Spoiler: it didn't.

But, there are millions of people like me out there – which is where GriefCast comes in. The brainchild of Cariad Lloyd, GriefCast is a podcast featuring Lloyd (who lost her father as a teenager) and a line-up of fellow comedians who she interviews about loved ones who have died, and how they dealt with their loss.

Guests have included Sara Pascoe talking about the loss of her beloved grandfather; Emily Dean, the radio presenter, on her sister and parents; Robert Webb, whose mother's death when he was 17 inspired his recent bestselling memoir, *How Not to Be a Boy*, and Gemma Whelan, *Game of Thrones* actress and character comic, whose father died in 2016.

Airing for the first time in 2016, GriefCast has become a huge word-of-mouth hit and a regular fixture on the iTunes chart. With 23 episodes already recorded, it feels part of a larger, franker conversation about our mortality. Books on the subject, such as the critically acclaimed *From Here to Eternity* by Caitlin Doughty, the American mortician, writer and YouTuber, are flying off the shelves and grieving friends and relatives can now go to a growing number of "death cafes" to share their experiences in a relaxed environment.



Dealing with loss: guests on the podcast by Cariad Lloyd, above, include Robert Webb, below



People are talking about death more, agrees Lloyd. After all, "everyone's going to go through it. Even if you hate your parents. No one is safe from grief".

Lloyd, 34, is best known as an actress, character comic and member of the successful improvisation troupe *Austentatious*. As she says in her regular opening spiel – to reassure grieving listeners that they're not about to hear an hour of stand-up – GriefCast is a show that examines "the weirdness of death, grief, pain and agony, but with comedians, so it's not that depressing".

Lloyd's father was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer when she was 15; he died two months later. It took much longer for Lloyd to come to terms with the loss.

"I didn't have therapy for 20 years," she says. "I didn't really talk about it, and now I can't stop talking about it. It makes him very present." At school, she says, she had a friend who also lost her dad. "I used to joke, 'we're the Dead Dad Club'. It's just the cheapest, easiest way of lightening the situation immediately. Losing someone isn't 100 per cent awful

and that's what I want to show. It is awful, but it's also complex."

There is a wide variety of experiences to listen to, ranging from miscarriage to the death of a parent, and in the shocking case of Kayleigh Llewellyn, the writer and stand-up, the experience of losing six people close to her in one year. Here's Llewellyn on grief harpies: "I'd be at the pub or a comedy night quickly nipping to the loo and someone would be like, 'Oh my God, how are you?', and I'd be like – 'Yeah yeah, I'm OK thanks'. And they want their moment with you, so they sort of take your hand and go, 'No but, this is awful, how are you?' and I'm like: 'Do you want me to weep on the steps of this pub? Will it make you feel good if I sob right now, or will you let me go and buy the beer I wanted to buy?'"

Balancing the funny with the awful is something that GriefCast does brilliantly. Lloyd recalls a desirable boy at school suddenly talking to her after her father died, and thinking there was finally a plus point. Sara Pascoe remembers her father buying her and her sisters cream cakes after a visit to the hospital, and then saying "Your grandad's dead!" just as they

were getting stuck in. Robert Webb recalls one cringeworthy episode with a university counsellor when he says he had been struggling to write an essay about *Dream of the Rood*, a poem about the crucifixion. "He said, 'Mmm hmmm. In a way, Robert, you've been crucified.' I burst out laughing".

Lou Conran, a stand-up who regularly supports Sarah Millican on tour, features in one of the funniest,

Breaking the news: Sara Pascoe tells Lloyd how she heard her grandad had died



and most gut-wrenching episodes of the current series. In 2016, when she was five and a half months pregnant, she discovered that her daughter had a condition that meant she would not survive. Conran learnt this from a consultant with such a strong accent that she could not understand him: "I thought this has got to be Ant or Dec pissing around with me, and any moment someone's going to come out and go 'Daaaaaaw!'"

Lloyd reacts to what Conran tells her very much as an ordinary listener: she is shocked when Conran describes having to give birth to her daughter once miscarriage had been induced, and when the stand-up explains how she was given the wrong date for the funeral and turned up to a Jewish man's funeral instead: "We went home, drank a bottle of wine, came back next week and had another go at it."

I ask if being rubbish at death is a particularly British thing. Lloyd corrects me: "We used to be very good at death. If you had a death in the family you'd have the black armband, so people would know you were in mourning. But we've lost a lot of our rituals. I wish I could have had a little badge that said I'm grieving, be gentle with me."

One issue that is frequently

'GriefCast examines death, grief, pain and agony, but with comedians, so it's not that depressing'

discussed on GriefCast is the struggle to find a way to grieve that both helps you and honours the departed. The episode with Gemma Whelan on how her family drew together after her father's death, sitting with the body and washing it, before upping sticks to her aunt's house for a series of long walks and loud, guttural crying in the woods is completely engrossing.

I say that I am often surprised at how recently some of Lloyd's guests have lost their loved ones, and how, unlike me, they are happy to talk about death and to acknowledge it.

"Some people are super-fresh," agrees Lloyd. "I recorded Hatty Ashdown three months after her mum died and she messaged me after it aired to say, 'Wow, I didn't realise how I sounded or where I was at.'" But that immediacy is the point. "I'm trying to capture a moment of grief. I'm so grateful for people coming to talk to me." She herself talks regularly about the effect that losing her father at such a young age has had on her on the show – does she find it exhausting?

"It's really up and down, like grief. I might have booked an interview and I don't want to talk about it, but it's helpful. The biggest thing I've found with the show is that grief can make you feel isolated. The podcast is about making people feel they're not alone. So I'm now on this mission to ensure that if there is a 15-year-old out there, they have the resources I didn't have."

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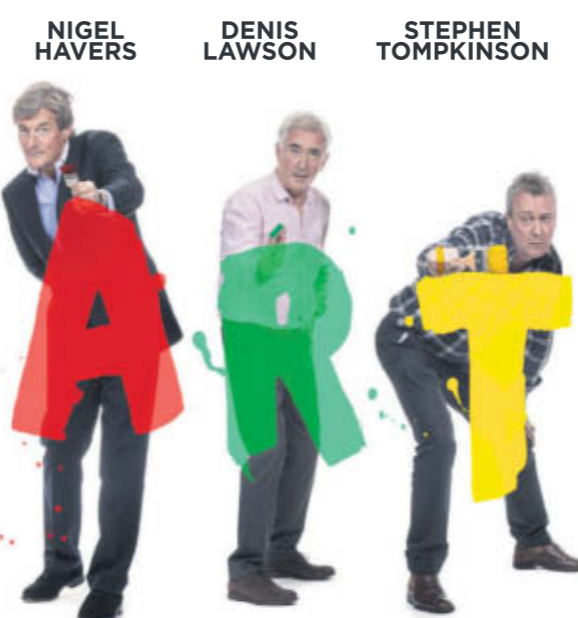
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