

## “Often a child’s first reaction to bereavement is anger. They want to blame someone because they can’t understand why this awful thing has happened”

Jane Hughes on coping with the death of a parent

**R**ecalling the day two years ago when she told her young children that their father had died in a motorbike accident, Tracy Oliver still has to fight back tears. Barely able to cope with her own deep shock at the loss of her husband, Don, she remembers trying to be as honest as possible so that neither child would hold out false hope. She knew that Annie, then two-and-a-half, wouldn’t fully understand but when she told Charlie, five, that his daddy had died in an accident and gone to heaven, he walked out of the room.

Later, Charlie asked for a photograph of his father and demanded to go to the fair. It was the last thing that Tracy wanted to do, but Don – who had been due home that morning after a weekend away in Weymouth – had promised Charlie he would take him. “As far as Charlie was concerned, his daddy had made a promise and it was something he could get angry about,” says Tracy. “So we went.”

Initially, Charlie asked lots of questions about the accident and was even able to speak to the policeman who had been there. But, as the months

went on, he grew increasingly withdrawn and quiet. Tracy, looking for help, took him to the Candle Project, a service for bereaved children run by the St Christopher’s Hospice in south London.

It came as a huge relief when the project’s co-ordinator, Frances Kraus, told Tracy she had been doing all the right things. “People try to protect children from the truth,” says Frances, “but that allows them to hold out hope that someone is still alive. Children need to be listened to and they need to know that life will continue as normal, which is why it was so important for Charlie to go to the fair.”

During Charlie’s visits, he and Frances read the Candle Project’s booklet, *Someone Special Has Died*, which addresses feelings of grief. “Charlie needed to keep checking out what had happened to make it real,” says Frances. “He asked how we knew his daddy was really dead and one of our doctors showed him how he would test for the pulse. This was a big relief for Charlie.”



Tracy Oliver with Charlie and Annie, now seven and four

Much of Frances’s work was about giving Charlie the language to talk about his father’s death. When Charlie started throwing temper tantrums and hitting people, it emerged that boys at school had been talking about their dads and he had got upset.

“Often a child’s first reaction to bereavement is anger,” says Frances. “They want to blame someone because they can’t understand why this awful thing has happened. I suggested to Charlie that he was feeling angry because he missed his daddy. I said it was all right to feel angry but not to hit people, and reminded him that he had had a super dad.”

While Charlie didn’t always let on how much he had understood in the sessions, his behaviour began to improve. Today he is a bright, eloquent seven-year-old who speaks proudly of his father and the things, like the small memory jar of coloured salt, that he made at the Candle Project.

“I used colours that daddy liked so I could have good memories of him,” he says. “I used purple because he supported West Ham, and white for the England team and green because he used to be in the [territorial] army. The orange and yellow remind me of when we went to the beach and daddy floated me in the water, because they are the colours of the sun and sand and daddy’s swimming trunks.”

“I was very upset when my daddy died. I went to play and forgot about it but I wanted him there a lot.” With Frances, he says, he drew a picture of the things he used to do with his father. “It made me feel more happy.”

Meanwhile, Tracy, always a tactile person, found it difficult to have people near her after Don’s death. She had to force herself to comfort and cuddle her children, even though she knew it was what they most needed. It was only when she joined the parent carers’ self-help group at the Candle Project that she overcame her sense of isolation. “At last people really did know how I felt and what I was going through,

PHOBIA OF THE WEEK: **HELMINTHOPHOBIA**

The fear of being infested with worms As opposed to liking the idea?



because they had also lost a partner," she says. "Seeing these parents carrying on with life at different stages after their bereavement gave me hope. It was also a reassurance to discuss problems we all shared, such as not knowing whether a child is having a typical temper tantrum or acting out of grief."

Eventually, Tracy decided not to return to her old job at the bank printing works where both she and Don had worked. She took courses in counselling skills and sign language, and is now working part-time at a school for disabled children and studying for a diploma in physiology, anatomy and massage. "Part of my life ended when Don died, but I treasure the time we had together," she says.

Charlie, too, treasures his memories. "My daddy was a good friend to me and my mum and now we burn a candle at Christmas to remember him." ●

The St Christopher's Candle Project (020-8778 9252) only works directly with children in southeast London but can offer telephone advice. The Childhood Bereavement Project (0115 911 8070) has information on projects in other areas

## REGIMEN

**Ellen MacArthur, 25, yachtswoman**

THIERRY MARTINEZ



**Height 5ft 2in  
Weight 9st**

### **Do you train at sea?**

Yes, my schedule makes it tough to get into a routine on land. Offshore racing is odd in that you have intense periods of several hours of continuous sail changes to keep the boat at peak performance, then only a few workouts for the next 12 hours. With sleep deprivation – I take 35-minute naps – and rough conditions onboard, overall fitness is vital.

### **How do you prepare for the rigours of racing?**

At sea it's governed by the wind and conditions.

On land, I swim and run, for up to an hour, and I do weight training. I love to trim up my leg muscles after months at sea.

### **Which is the most crucial part of your body as a sailor?**

My upper-body strength. Sailing involves a lot of shifting of very heavy objects and winching loads of several tons.

### **Have you suffered any injuries at sea?**

I split my head open falling down a hatch in a solo transatlantic race in 2000. Apart from that, knee injuries are quite awkward as legs don't get much exercise on a 60-ft boat; nothing ever

stays still at sea and joints tend to seize up under the stress of an ever-moving platform.

### **What are the rewards of training?**

The fitter I am the easier the racing is. If I can take a reef out of the mainsail quicker, that is the best payback for the training.

### **Do you follow a special diet?**

At sea I eat mostly high-carbohydrate snacks, vitamin supplements and freeze-dried food. Keeping weight down is a key factor on a boat; every gram slows you down. On land I tend to reverse this and eat huge amounts of fresh fruit.

### **How do you relax?**

I sail. Being at sea is the best place for me to relax.

### **What helps you focus?**

I've never had a problem focusing on the goal of reaching the finish line as soon as possible; it's how I've lived my life, I just do it.

### **What's the next race?**

A two-up race in Fonica-Kingfisher, a

60-ft trimaran, across the Atlantic and south to Brazil. These boats are more physical than those in the Vendée Globe, so I have a lot to learn. Obviously we hope to be on the winner's podium. ●

**Nick Wyke**

*The Transat Jacques Vabre race leaves Le Havre tomorrow*

**5  
MINUTE FIX**

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