

I will Survive!

A helpful guide to help manage the impact on mental and physical health, for grandparents finding themselves estranged from their grandchildren.



Bristol
Grandparents
Support Group

When grandparents find themselves estranged from their grandchildren it feels hopeless and we must find ways of dealing with this living bereavement, we know that if we don't find a way through the difficult times it will have an impact on our mental and physical health.

It is why I wrote the “I Will Survive Plan” to give grandparents some strategies to enable them to find their way through and regain hope. It is a resource that can be picked up at anytime & revisited when necessary.

I. Letting Go

In order to let go, or turn things around it is important to ask for help. We need to accept that we cannot do this alone, so we need to identify in our own minds who we feel we can trust to help and support us. It can be a family member, a close friend, a counsellor or someone within the support group. Asking for help is a strength.

The person/people you choose need to be aware of their role and know what you expect of them. If you ask, they can say no if they don't feel strong enough, or have problems of their own. If you begin together working as a team to get through this, there is more chance that you will see it through together to the (we hope not bitter) end.

Some of us choose to speak to a counsellor, which ensures confidentiality and the knowledge that you have a trained listener who has no vested interest in your situation, so will give unbiased feedback. Find out more about different kinds of counselling here.

itsgoodtotalk.org.uk/what-is-therapy

Some counsellors will offer low cost work if you need it. Or you may be able to get some sessions free from your GP. Some therapists will offer a free or cut price introductory

session, (it's always worth asking) so you have little or nothing to lose by shopping around.

Counsellors are a bit like soup, not every kind suits everyone's taste. It's worth trying a few until you find the one that is just right for you. If you don't like the first one you try, it would be a shame give up on soup altogether, try another variety!

Here are some websites which ensure that the counsellors using them are fully qualified.

members.psychotherapy.org.uk/findATherapist

itsgoodtotalk.org.uk

counselling-directory.org.uk

Also checks the qualifications of its advertisers. This is not an exhaustive list, but a place to begin.

In a nutshell. Find someone you trust and ask them to be your “I will survive” partner.

Feedback time! - Ok, so this is where you come in, discuss your views, who have you been to as a ‘trusted friend’ did it work for you? If not why not?





2. Have empathy for yourself

If you are beating yourself up with your own self-talk or dwelling for long periods on negative thoughts, it is difficult to make progress. Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Behavioural Therapy advises us to tune in to the times when we are on Automatic Pilot.

Automatic Pilot

This is when our thoughts may absorb us so much that we don't notice what is going on around us. For example, we might drive somewhere and have no recollection of the journey.

At times it is useful to be able to complete a boring task while focusing on something else. However our thoughts are not always helpful to our state of mind. Time spent planning what you will pack to go on holiday has a very different effect on mood from endlessly replaying an unsatisfactory conversation you had last week or thinking what you would like to say to someone you feel angry with.

It is interesting to notice how much time our minds spend in the past or future and how little in the present moment. What we think about is a choice. Being aware of what is going on inside our heads is the first step towards making some changes. To begin, just noticing is enough. If you are a writer, jotting down recurring themes may be interesting to look back on.

Think about how you would respond to your friend if he/she was in a similar situation to you.

Ask yourself these questions:

Are you speaking to yourself in the same way? If not, why not?

Spend a little time everyday practicing wishing yourself well. "May I be well, may I be happy." They don't have to be the same everyday but they must be kind!

If you find you are not being kind to yourself, think back to what your friend would say to you (if it's not kind, find a new friend!) and say the same to yourself.

In a nutshell - Notice your thought habits. Practice being kind to yourself.



3. Relationships

With your trusted person, and with the spirit of kindness to yourself, look carefully at your past and present relationships.

Members' grief is complicated in many ways. Unlike bereavement through death, it is more difficult to find resolution. More than one "precious but lost" person may be involved, and they may still around, though not within reach.

There may be a breakdown in relationships with family who may be expected to give you support in a more conventional bereavement. It is important to look at the nature of the bereavement as individuals, as without knowing it, and understanding the full extent of it, it will be difficult, if not impossible resolve.

Here are some questions which might help:

“Which, if any, of your relationships have changed since the estrangement?”

“Were those changes for the better or worse?”

“How would I like things to be in a year's time?”

“Is this an achievable wish, if not what would be an acceptable second best?”

“How can I make this happen?”

Think of some questions for yourself and maybe some for the group.

Writers might like to do some writing!

In a nutshell - Have a really good look at how things are for you, measure what you have lost. Also notice any positive outcomes, for example, you may have become closer to one person, due to your separation from another, you may have more time to do your own thing.

This may not seem like a positive now, but it could become one if you chose to make it so in time.



4. Behaviours

With your trusted person, and with the spirit of kindness to yourself, look carefully at your past and present behaviours. We need to recognise that we cannot control the behaviour of others. What we can do is to plan to find ways to deal with our own emotions and behaviour so that we can enjoy the rest of our lives as well as we can. We have this choice.

Everyone is different and will want to explore different ideas, but some things to be looking out for could be,

- Ruminating and replaying events and conversations.
- Jealousy over relationships and situations.
- Spending more time mentally in the past than in the present.
- Excessive behaviours: eating, drinking, shopping, smoking, internet use, (insert your own) beyond what feels ok.
- Self-neglect.
- Telling your story to more others than feels ok, looking for people to be on your side.
- Not giving others the benefit of the doubt, being negative.
- Not taking your share of the responsibility, blaming others. Not seeing any shades of grey.

Some of these are coping strategies, some are habits, we need to think about how well they serve us and if we want to let go of them. Just noticing them is good, as once we know about them and where they come from, we have more chance of making changes.

What do you think of these ideas to keep our minds in the present moment, from Mindfulness Based CBT?

Our minds are like puppies: they will go their own way and examine whatever takes their fancy, healthy or not, because that is what minds and puppies do! We can treat our own minds with kindness and understanding and lead them gently back on track as we would an innocent puppy.

If our thoughts are going off in directions we feel are unhealthy for us, we can lead them back to a different focus. It is helpful to keep this in mind with all the exercises below.

STOP Technique

This helps us to keep an eye on our inner climate. Practicing it regularly is a bit like going to the gym: it builds up resilience and helps us prepare for emotional marathons we may need to complete in the future. Like going to the gym, it only works if you do it!

Find a time when you regularly have a few minutes to yourself to begin. After a while it will become a habit, you can do it anywhere you have found helpful, several times a day.

STOP...

- Take a long luxurious breath...
- Observe what is going on in your mind and body without judgement, (puppy). What is your emotional weather like at present?
- Proceed with what you were doing.

Mindful eating

Moving the focus of our thoughts to food.

Helps us to fully enjoy our food and gives the mind some focusing practice too. Before you even start to eat, switch off the TV, close down the computer and resolve to concentrate your attention on your meal alone. Observe the look and smell of your meal for a few seconds.

Notice any bodily sensations which are aroused. Take a mouthful and avoid chewing for a moment or two, notice how this feels. Continue with your meal noticing feedback from your emotions, as well as all five senses.

Mindful walking

This time the focus is your feet. If you are in a safe place to do so, slow your walking right down and feel the sensations in the muscles in your legs and feet as you move and notice the texture of the ground you are walking on. When your thoughts wander; return your attention to your feet.

Variations

Co-ordinate your breathing with your walking pace: for example, three steps for each in breath, and three steps for each out breath (or what is appropriate for you). Your focus then would be the breath; this is where your attention returns when stray thoughts creep in. Or make your focus what is going on around you. Notice what each of your senses picks up from your surroundings.

Mindfulness in daily life.

There are many everyday tasks which can be used to give our minds a break from their constant chatter; bringing our attention to the present moment and using the task as a focus.

In a nutshell - Practice staying in the present moment, find ways to calm your busy mind to give yourself a break from its chatter.



5. To allow any guilt, resentment and shame to dissolve

When these feelings arise we need to think of positive statements, such as, "I am ok" or perhaps a song that has a positive message as in the title of this plan, "I will survive." Sing it at the top of your voice if you want to! If it doesn't work the first time, do it again!

In a nutshell - Encourage positive thoughts in any way you can. It may be hard at first, but will get easier.



6. Begin to make changes

If we can develop self-acceptance, it is the key to change. It takes practice! Don't expect it to happen straight away. You will have bad days, it's allowed, practice forgiving yourself, remember the puppy!

Notice good things that happen. Keep a log of things which have lifted your spirits: the birds singing, the smell of coffee or bread baking in the oven. It is the simple things that are so wonderful. Look up to the sky not down to the ground.

Remind yourself it is ok to be happy sometimes, this is another choice. On bad days, look at the log. On good days, write something to inspire you on the bad days.

In a nutshell - Look for positive things outside yourself and let them in!



7. Work towards peace of mind.

We need to look at ways to enhance our lives. Think about what you want from life even without the 'precious other' missing from your life at the moment. Is it through art? Physical activity? Exploring the natural world? Helping others? Extending your horizons through travel or further education?

Strengthen yourself, to increase honesty, awareness, to improve your mood and promote well-being. Support and help others, develop your compassion and lessen self-centeredness, communicate with others. You have skills and strengths to be shared if you would like to. Volunteering services value older volunteers, it's worth an internet search to see what might be interesting in your area.

Congratulate yourself - If you have reached this stage! Enjoy life!



Resources



If you have found the Mindfulness practices useful, here are some links to learn a bit more:

Scientific evidence

mindful.org/news/how-mindfulness-changes-the-brain

Practical ideas

goodmenproject.com/featured-content/must-50-ways-leave-stress-lal/

TED talk

ted.com/talks/andy_puddicombe_all_it_takes_is_10_mindful_minutes

An eight week Mindfulness course helps some people.

There are many books on the subject! How about this one?

goodreads.com/book/show/22460070-why-mindfulness-is-better-than-chocolate

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