

Grief Kind Podcast Transcript - Episode 2, Candice Brathwaite

Clover Stroud: Hello and welcome to *Grief Kind*, a podcast by Sue Ryder which helps you to support friends and loved ones going through one of the toughest times of their lives. I'm Clover Stroud. In each episode, I'll be talking to someone who, like me, has experienced grief firsthand and who can talk about the support they've received. Hopefully, each conversation will empower you to be Grief Kind, to avoid clamming up and to give your friends and family the love, compassion, and support that they need.

In this episode, I'm joined by the amazing Candice Brathwaite. Candice is a complete inspiration. She's a successful author, a journalist, a TV presenter, and founder of Make Motherhood Diverse and is also a huge presence on Instagram, where her straight-talking original content has become a big hit with fans. A self-confessed beaut, and fashion obsessive, Candice now has a regular style segment on *Lorraine* on ITV, is a contributing editor to *Grazia*, and often appears on national radio and television news channels. When she was just 21 Candice's dad, Richard, died suddenly. She was living out of the country at the time and didn't get on with her dad's new family. She talks about the isolation she felt in grief and about the support she got from her friends.

Candice talks about how support isn't always doing, it's just being there. I hope you enjoy this conversation.

Clover: Candice, it's so nice to see you, and it's such a complete honour to be talking to you about this really, really important subject which defines so much of who we are and it's such a big part... Death is such a massively big part of life and how to live well too. We're going to dive straight in here. I know that you were working as a nanny in Italy and you were just 21 when your dad, Richard, died very suddenly and very unexpectedly. Do you want to start off by just telling me a little bit about the experience of finding out that your dad had died and how that happened?

Candice Brathwaite: Yes. I found out in a really harsh manner. We were just coming up to this whole Facebook time and Twitter had just started. I remember sitting down to check my emails because the host family I was with had gone away for the weekend, so I was in the apartment alone. I was getting all of these emails from my dad's colleagues that were like, "Phone me now. Phone me now." My dad was a solicitor and I used to be a receptionist at the law firm. I instinctively email my dad. I'm like, "Oh, my God. Speak to the IT guys. I think the work server has been hacked because everyone is emailing me with the same line. 'Call me now. Call me now.'"

I'm like, "Yes, something dodgy is going on." I don't know, Clover. I'm not going to lie to you. I don't know exactly when the penny dropped, but as the emails kept coming down, and there was no response from my dad, who night and day lived by his BlackBerry at

the time, I was like, "I think he's dead you know." It was just so fleeting and felt so silly, but there was a flicker in me that was like, "Oh, they've not been scammed or hacked. He hasn't got back to me. I think he's dead." That just sounded really crazy. I called his house phone and it was engaged and then the penny really dropped because my dad and his partner at the time never used that house phone.

Then I called my maternal grandmother and I'm in a panic, and I'm like, "I think dad's died." Of course, she's like, "You sound absolutely crazy. There's no reason to think that. I'm going to call the house right now." I think it took four or five minutes for us to hang up and for her to call me back. The only thing my maternal grandmother said was, "I'm sorry," and then the floodgates opened. That was Saturday morning. I had spoken to him down the line on Wednesday evening and he said... He called me Cand. He was like, "Cand, I've got a really bad cold and I just can't shake it. I think I'm going to take a couple of days off work."

Dad taking time off work, that was unheard of, so he must have felt pretty poorly. Turns out that Saturday morning he was going to watch his beloved Arsenal play. He felt so bad. He stopped in at Whipps Cross A&E and he went into cardiac arrest in front of everyone. It turned out that it wasn't a cold, it was the flu which had, for some way, become sepsis. His whole bloodstream had become infected. Even if they had propped him up in that moment, it might have just given me enough time to get home. We learned, later on, there was absolutely no going back, by the time he'd gone to hospital.

Clover: His death was very, very shocking for you, and very, very sudden. Normally, in normal circumstances, would you have been talking to him regularly? Were you very close to him? I've seen photos of him and you look exactly like him.

[laughter]

Candice: Yes, it's strange, I still say "we are super close". I am his only child, I have two other siblings, but they have different dads. I'm my father's only child and we were super duper close. It just took the wind out of me and I'm often desperately jealous. I'm ashamed to say it, of those people who had longer lead times, to their family members dying, where you can put things on the table and talk things out and in some ways feel really self assured about your love for them and their love for you and you can tidy it up.

Not having that, it's weird to call it a regret, because I couldn't change that. I regret that so much, it actually fills me with slight anger. Now it's happened, I'm learning I can live past the death. What I struggle with daily is not having my say and that's such a Richard Brown thing to say, that's such a dad thing to say.

[laughter]

Clover: But that shock, I've had very shocking experiences with bereavement as well, and that sense of shock has stayed with me actually across the decades. It doesn't really seem to go away, the shock and the feeling of slightly being robbed and the anger that you feel because of that. That suddenness and that shock, how has that affected the way that you grieve your dad?

Candice: It's happening in stages, in increments. I did the whole lie on the floor and just drink myself into craziness for two weeks. And then it seems like I almost block out a period of time, once a quarter where I'm just like, I'm feeling down right now. Actually, I'm grieving and I have to do this in stages, because I'm just still dealing with something so loved being taken from me so quickly. So it does mean and it feels to me as though the grieving period is pulled out. I know I'm going to feel like this for life but the depth of despair, I can feel like it's been 10 years. And I feel like if it hadn't happened in that shocking way, I might not get as low as I do now.

Clover: Yes. We use the word loss, and I certainly have found my... I've lost my mother and my sister, and I've found the two experiences of grieving an acutely lonely process, and only you can walk through it, nobody else can do that for you. After your dad died, did you feel especially alone or lost? Who did you have around you?

Candice: Completely alone. I had great friends and I had okay support from family. The issue being that my mother, both her parents are still alive and my grandparents come from a time where death is death. Okay... It's just like, you bury that body and you don't even show mourning, so there's a complete disconnect there. Out of all of my friends, at that time, I was the only one to have suffered a loss in that way. I felt very alone and then to just throw salt into the wound, the period of burial was very, very messy for me.

There were strained arguments between family members and lots of ill feelings that absolutely had nothing to do with me because I'm a baby at the time or I was a baby when these feelings were floating around but now all these adults just want to shout at each other. I felt deeply alone, I actually still do, I absolutely still do. I think now actually, I might feel more alone because the pomp of the funeral has long gone. Only so few people are texting on the anniversary of his death so I feel more alone now, actually.

Clover: Do you feel more determined to keep him alive I suppose in the way that you live because of that, because of that feeling of... you're such a physical embodiment of him as well. It's a beautiful thing to see, but do you feel like a sort of duty and a sense of needing to honor him in the way that you live or the way that you parent, the way that you are?

Candice: Yes, completely, I'm always trying to keep his spirit alive, especially for my children, my son, my youngest is named Richard Jr and my daughter Esmé is very like, "Oh yes, I think grandpa Richard would have liked that." I find that hilarious because, of course, they never met. They share a date. The day Esmé was born is the anniversary of my dad's death. I'm very into the woo-woo. I find comfort in that. I feel like that was my dad saying, "Kid, you've got to get over this and I'm trying to take this sorrowful day and now make it this moment where you get to celebrate your kids. I'm trying to give you some light in this darkness."

Clover: I read somewhere that you said - which I found incredibly moving - you said the way that you parent is... your grief is completely wrapped around your love for your children, and that sense of the bringing your grief into your love. You have this, like, the kind of the pain and the love at the same time, and the children almost become the kind of vessel and embodiment of that.

[laughter]

Candice: No, honestly, I'm also really frank with Esmé about death. She's really frank about having that conversation, which is completely uncomfortable for her father because he's lost no one. Even in my day-to-day relationship, there is some friction because I'm grieving or I will make a comment about a Will or wanting to be cremated. He'll totally shut that down because he'll be like, "Oh, nonsense, we don't need to talk about that," and I'm like, "We absolutely always must speak about that," because you know we say as this flippant thing, but we actually don't know when we're going to die.

I do not want the wind to be taken out of my kids' sails in the way that it was done to me. I had no preparation. I was this 20-year-old kid living in this romantic place, just clouded by a disconnect from the reality of the cycle of life because if you don't need to know, you don't know, and I'm like, "Actually we all need to know." We all need to have what I think is incorrectly pedalled as an uncomfortable conversation.

Clover: Yes, completely.

[laughter]

Clover: Also I think the conversations about, what do you think... What do you want to happen? How do you want to be honoured? What do you think happens after death? I mean, my sister died very suddenly of cancer, and by the time she had secondary cancer, it was too late to have conversations with her about what do you think happens when you die? Because you can't force that conversation on somebody who is facing

death as well. I now make sure that I talk to the kids all the time about what my beliefs are about what happens after death, if anything happens after death.

How they might remember me or not, and not in a morbid or maudlin or self-obsessed way, but in a really positive way actually. I think those conversations are so important. The research from Sue Ryder says as well, and I think many people will have experiences that many people just don't know what to say or are afraid of saying the wrong thing or causing offense after death. Are you aware of friends kind of tiptoeing around you or not mentioning your dad when you wanted to, or treating you in a way that you might not want to have been treated that didn't help?

Candice: Yes, completely. At that time especially, we were all young, 19, 20, 21 max. No one knew what to do. Now I'm a bit older. I'm understanding that it's not even doing, it's just being. I've not experienced a death like that since, but there have been moments in my life where it's felt very touch and go. The most soothing thing has been people just being, just leaving food on the doorstep. Like there doesn't even have to be a discussion, right?

Just leaving food on the doorstep or just being like, "I'm popping to the shops. What can I get you?" It doesn't have to be you coming in and holding me or us having this deep four hour conversation where you feel then the heaviness of what I'm going through. It's just being, it's just silently picking up in those moments where especially, I would say in that six month period after, where the person grieving might not even wash. You might not even shower.

Clover: That's the loss of your.. the kind of physiological breakdown that happens after death when the world has turned into a jigsaw puzzle, it's got all its pieces missing, and you can't put it back together. I remember...

Candice: You are walking down the street and you see people laughing outside of a coffee shop, and you're enraged.

Clover: Yes, furious!

[laughter]

Clover: How could they be so heartless? How do they not know?

[laughter]

Candice: Literally!

Clover: I think that that thing of just being there as well, because there also can be a kind of-- I was aware after Nell died sometimes of like a couple of friends who were, "I really want to come over and look after you and hold you." Actually, it was very kind, but I didn't really want to be held or looked after in that way. As you said, I might just have wanted like macaroni cheese put on the... or the dog taken for a walk, or a really good friend would just email me saying, "I'm sitting outside your door and I'm there."

She's actually in America, but that sense of like, "I'm kind of walking beside you in some way or another." I have found that really helpful. Was there a standout moment with a family member or close friend where you can remember somebody really being there and really reaching out in the right way?

Candice: Due to all of this family argument, I get to the church on the day of my dad's burial and my name is not on the service sheet. The pastor doing the burial doesn't know my dad has a kid, and you know where you sit down on those seats? Everyone's family name is there and not mine, so I'm sat at the back of the church. When the pastor finds out my dad has me, and he then tells the whole congregation how he's deeply saddened and embarrassed that there seems to be some miscommunication and family friction, and that, "Richard Brown has a child and I'm going to invite her to speak," much to the dismay of many of my dad's family because they are really trying to ice me out of this situation, that much is clear.

My best friend, I've known him since we were 14, takes my hand and walks me down the aisle. Because I don't want to speak. I already know how much I'm not wanted in that moment. There was something romantic about that. There was something in the way like a woman is walked down the aisle. There was just this very transformative energy and he stood by the side of the stage as I completely, I won't lie, ripped most of the congregation for filth in that moment.

[laughter]

Candice: Then he just took my hand and we trotted off, and it felt like very Vogue-ish. It just felt like the Met Gala. I was just like, "Yes, power." As sad as I was, yes, that is a standout moment because that friend has done that for me time and time again in different ways, and I'm really steadying myself for when I have to return the favour because that's what friendship is, and hopefully, I'm going to do a good job just because I have this much-unwanted experience.

Clover: Yes, absolutely. It's about showing up, I suppose, absolutely. What your friend did for you. That's a really, really incredible showing up and support. What are the actual phrases? I have found, when my sister died, people said, "I can't begin to imagine what you're going through. I can't begin to imagine your grief. I can't begin to imagine how bad

your pain is." I know people were trying to be helpful, but I actually found it really, really upsetting because grief is really lonely anyway, and being continually told your pain is so intense is unimaginable.

I didn't find that very helpful at all. Like my friend saying, "I'm by your door for you," was a lot more helpful. Are there kind of actual phrases, things that people... I think that thing of not knowing what to say, what do I say? What other things that people say, do you think, which are actually helpful? I know that I like talking about who my sister was. Do you like talking about your dad?

Candice: I love that. I know why we do it, but I'm now getting into the habit because I didn't like this, "I'm so sorry for your loss." I just cut that down to, "I'm so sorry," because the reality is I didn't lose this guy. For a long time, I knew exactly where to find him. He died, dude, he died, because even the word loss, that communicates that this is something that can be unearthed again, if we look hard enough.

It's not going to happen, you know?! Now I just tell people, "I'm sorry," because I am sorry, but I'm not going to call it a loss. The person has died and I'm frank with my language. Aside from that, like you were saying, I just like to talk about who they were and in many ways still are, the banter. I loved getting those sympathy cards that were quite cheeky. A couple of his friends were like, "I really didn't like your dad." I'm like, "I know boo-boo. I didn't like him." Just that is great.

Clover: I think being really, really, really honest about the person as well. Nobody is a saint for God's sake, are they?

[laughter]

Clover: I found after Nell died, some people were like, "Oh, she was such a sweet, nice person." She was a diva. She was like a real, full on diva. I wouldn't say she was sweet and nice, which makes her sound like something she really wasn't. I love people saying, "Yes, she was ferocious and a force of nature. I had a massive row with her about this at one point."

[laughter]

Clover: Then you can laugh about it rather than... because in a way when you also only remember these positive things about somebody, you dehumanise them. Our faults make us human, don't they?

Candice: Yes.

Clover: Rather than, "He was an angel, he did all these wonderful things." There's probably that and there's also the other way where you've been really, really annoyed, had arguments, disagreements, rubbed up against each other in the wrong way, and being able to celebrate that as well, celebrating the human being that they are. Because also grief itself, there's the immediate aftermath of the death, which is as we've spoken about is very, very heightened and you had a very, very difficult and traumatic experience at your dad's funeral, but grief brings out anger, rage, upset, loss, family divisions.

It doesn't... you know, I remember talking to Nell about this actually and about our mum's death and whether it had made... people think, "Oh, this is going to make you closer," as though this traumatic experience is going to pull you closer. Why should it pull you closer?

[laughter]

Clover: It really doesn't.

Candice: Woo. Oh, Clover, that is a word, because it actually, for me, it pulled me so far apart from family members that... my father's parents, I believe they're still alive. I absolutely don't have a relationship with them. My children don't even know they exist. That's just how it has to be for the sake of my mental health. Also that's just not how death and grief is written about or sold. Again, it's like, birth, marriage, death they bring families and communities together. We all huddle together and we're uber loving. No.

Death especially I found, especially in the black community, lots of tension. Lots of people who for decades have kept stuff on their chests now see someone they don't like across the room at the wake, and the sandwiches go flying, literally. It's like, it's that too. I know I just said, "Don't use the word loss," but in this way it makes sense. I've had to understand that my dad's death has cost me losses in other areas.

Clover: Yes, I hear you on that.

Candice: I'm not solely grieving the fact that he's died. I am grieving a relationship that will not be between my grandparents and my children. I am grieving and I think it's important to say this because this still feels rare to me, but the more I talk about it, it's not. I'm grieving the fact that I have no physical place to grieve my dad, as his ashes were scattered without me and I don't know where. I'm grieving the loss of having a physical... there are so many things tied into this death that I always try to communicate with people, some deaths are the messiest thing that are ever going to enter your life.

Clover: It's as though death sends a domino of other losses forward, doesn't it?

Candice: Yes.

Clover: That can be very unexpected and very... exacerbates many, many, many-fold the pain of the loss of this person that you love and the loss of the complicated, beautiful relationship. That thing of not having a place to go to, do you feel that like having a place to go and be? You don't have a grave or a cemetery or anything or place to go to where... That must be really, really hard.

Candice: I think one of the hardest things. Like, I think second to him actually dying that is just the hump in the road that this girl cannot get over. I struggle with that and I find great peace in just walking through cemeteries. I cannot pass one without stopping and walking really slowly and taking in these people's headstones, the information, and thinking about their life. I know it's because I don't have that for the person in my life that I still love who has died. I find myself trying to pick up the energy of other people. That is the toughest thing.

Clover: I also find people talk about, "Oh, look inside your heart or go to the places that she liked," in my sister's case, or, "Cook the things that she liked." I actually have not always found that very helpful at all. Sometimes it just makes me even more aware of her absence. Especially in the first six months, I found myself talking to her and then you kind expect some mystical voice to answer you as the clear sign. Obviously you don't, you just hear the kids fighting in the other room and the resounding silence. Where do you go to find your dad now? Where is he with you? How is he with you now?

Candice: It sounds mushy, but just in my heart and also very much in my space. There are things that have happened in my life. Situations, opportunities. I do always like, look over my shoulder and I'm like, "I hear you, thanks." Because they just feel so Richard Brown-esque. Or, "I've got you, dad, I hear that." Because I dream about him, not often, but when I do the message is always really clear and really sincere. I have my own thoughts about what happens after death, but I treat my dreams... I take them very seriously and they're very sacred to me. I'll wake up and I'll write it down and I'd be like, "Right, I heard that. Thanks for that warning or that message."

Clover: What about anniversaries? They're really hard, aren't they? How do you get through the anniversaries? Who helps you? Do you do anything together? The birthdays, the death days, the funeral days?

Candice: Who helps us? When his birthday comes around, I do just honour that silently. The anniversary is so different because again, it's Esmé's birthday and Esmé's really aware of like, "Oh, this is the day grandpa Richard died." It just gets all wrapped into that, and the death anniversary doesn't feel sad at all anymore. Like I said, maybe that was his gift, I don't know, but I'm just like, "Oh, I miss you and I wish you could see your

granddaughter, but here we are, we're going to celebrate, we're going to look at these photos. We're going to have these conversations."

And then Richard Jr comes bounding down the stairs and it's like, Richard Sr has entered the chat and we are like, "Oh, we're not missing him at all, are we? Because Richard is here, turning over the table." I'm lucky in that regard though, I'm so lucky. Am I lucky, or... As I say, was the universe as I call it like, "Oh my God, let's throw this girl a rope." She's got no idea where his remains are, she's got nowhere to mourn and grieve. Let's give her something. You know?

Clover: Do you suddenly get that moment where you feel like you've been knocked to your knees? You've been winded? Where something really catches you off your guard, which obviously happens continually to start with, following death?

Candice: Now, those winded moments are when good things are happening. I'm like, "Oh, I wish you could see this or experience it," or - you may have this with Nell or your mum - where they might have called something for you and now it's happening and they're not here. That's really strange because all around you, people are like, "Well done, this is really great," but you come home and you just curl up. Because you're like, "There were 500 of you in that room and none of you were the right person!"

[laughter]

Candice: None of you were giving me the energy I needed! That again, it's just like that tautness of always being pulled because great things are happening. I'm smiling again, the good is outweighing the bad feelings, right? It's in those really good happy moments, like having another kid, or... I'm just like, "The one person..."

Clover: You want in the room there? Yeah.

Candice: Yes. It's just not... and what's so funny is I know that I only really want you here because you're not.

Clover: Absolutely. I think those conversations, to anybody listening to this, I think I would really, really urge people to have the conversations with the living about death and about how we deal with it, and how we... what happens after the death of the people that we love and how we treat each other and how we honour each other is really, really fundamentally important. Just the last thing, really, if somebody is listening to this podcast because they want to help somebody in pain, they want to reach out, what words of advice would you give to them about how to help somebody, what to do? Just some advice about dealing with a friend in pain, helping a friend.

Candice: Advice? Just being, and a lot of patience, because I can look back and categorically say I lost my mind a bit. I lost my sense of self. I lost my entire being. This isn't months, that took years, years to piece back together. There was one particular friend who was there with me on the day of my dad's funeral, not the one who walked me down the aisle, who then couldn't be my friend because it was too hard for her, and she came back into my life when Esmé was born.

It's patience, because if you are that kind of friend, you are going to want to patch up and make good and fill a gap and you absolutely can't do that, so you just have to be, and in just being, it does mean that you might have to stand back and watch a car wreck for a couple of years.

Clover: Yes.

[laughter]

Candice: That takes time. This is absolutely not your friend not getting a text back from a guy at uni. This is absolutely not them not getting a job they thought they wanted. This is something that we cannot replace or put a puzzle piece in or use anything to plug that hole. That hole starts to get smaller over time, and I feel like with grief, the person grieving of course, but also those trying to support and help, we're always trying to speed it up.

We're always, "Okay let's hurry this along. What club can we go to? What book can we..." You just have to be, and if being means sitting on the other side of the bathroom door for four hours or making sure the milk hasn't gone off or offering to collect a kid or walk a dog, that's what it is.

Clover: Yes. I think that long term thing, that kind of long term walking beside your friends and it isn't just the first two weeks, isn't just the first month, it's a big process that changes you forever, doesn't it? Real friendship and real patience and understanding and love is true friendship basically, isn't it? It's so important to people who are grieving and who are changed by the death of the people that they love around them. It's been so, so nice talking to you Candice. Thank you so much for joining me today.

Grief is different for everybody. There is no one size fits all approach, but you don't need a degree in counseling to help a loved one who is grieving. It's about the personal support you can offer, which should always be led by what feels right for the grieving person. The most important thing is to ensure that no one has to live through grief alone. To get more information on how to help grieving friends and relatives, go to sueyder.org/griefkindpodcast. Don't forget to follow us on your favorite podcast app to



get the next episode as soon as it's ready. I'm Clover Stroud. *Grief Kind* is a Bengo Media production for Sue Ryder.