

Grief Kind Podcast Transcript - Episode 1, Lisa Riley

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 first-hand 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 BAFTA-winning actress Lisa Riley. Lisa's mum, Cath, died from pancreatic cancer back in 2012. Twelve years after she was diagnosed with stage four breast cancer. In this interview, Lisa explains how she's still grieving nine years later and if you're looking to support someone who's grieving, Lisa talks about the importance of letting them know you're there without forcing your help onto them.

Lisa is so incredibly open about her grief and I really hope you get a lot out of our conversation. Lisa, it's so lovely to see you. Welcome to *Grief Kind*. I've heard you speaking really openly and articulately so many times about your mum and about grief and how it's affected you and the role it plays in your life. I'm really looking forward to this conversation.

Lisa Riley: Thank you.

Clover: I'd love to start to just know a little bit more about your lovely mum, Cath. What can you tell us about her?

Lisa: Mum was the life and soul. Anyone that knows me, she made me look timid and that's not an exaggeration. I always say that mum was the oxygen of the room. She loved people. She listened. All my best friends were like, it was always the line of, I wish I had a mum like you. She would take everyone's problems on and she never judged people. That's one attribute that I've taken from her. That's how I live my life every single day.

Her love for life, her smile, which I'm so glad that I've carried on, I promised her even in her last week of her life, I said "If one part of your legacy I'm taking, it's your smile" and it's that electricity where it becomes so inviting for others. That's what she did. She just invited people in. She'd be walking around the supermarket, it'd be like, oh, there's Cath Riley, because she had this zest for life. I suppose that's sometimes when you go, why take my mum so soon? It's one of those which is another layer to my personal daily pain.

[Clover: Yes. That feeling of the people who are so loving and radiant and bring so much joy and happiness to other people's lives, when they get taken, that unfairness of it can make you feel incredibly angry as well, can't it? Why did it have to be her? I really sympathise with that feeling.

Lisa: I went through a huge part of my grief, which I've read about this, they do call it the why-time. When you put the news on and you see all the pain, anguish in the world, you go, why have you taken my mum? What's my mum done? Happened today. I want to ring my mum. I want to call my mum and say, "Look what's happening." I'm like, "Mum, why can't you?" I spend my life just talking to the ether. Even if people think I'm bonkers, I don't care because that's my conversation with mum.

Clover: Well, we'll talk a bit later about how you live with her ongoing in your life but tell us a little bit more about her initial diagnosis because she was diagnosed with cancer I think in 2000. Is that right?

Lisa: Yes. I always make time for my family no matter what but my filming schedule is full-on and of the day when I'm not learning lines of an evening or shooting during the day. So, Friday night, no matter what, was always family night. Wherever I was, whether it was in London, in Manchester, in Leeds, where I was filming, we'd always go back to mum and dad's house. I arrived at the house and dad was in the lounge. I went upstairs and mum was, "Oh, I'm just finishing my shower off." She literally came out of the shower, saw me was, "Oh, hi darling." Then she went for a cuddle. The towel dropped and I saw. Got me crying already. It's really normal. I do this all the time. Sorry.

Clover: Oh, I understand. Please don't apologise. I understand.

Lisa: Mum's towel dropped. I saw her areola look really wrong. I'm a woman. I know what breasts are supposed to look like. The inversion of her nipple was very blatant for me to see. The colouration around her areola and I was like, "What's that?" She was like, "Oh my god, don't be a drama queen. It's fine." She completely shrugged it and now I know why because she'd obviously been living with that for so, so long. We didn't talk about it then as much as we do now and that awareness wasn't there.

Me being me, control freak, I was like, "I'm going to go into action here". I rang Mr Dsouza who I knew had a phenomenal rating of his brilliance and certainly with breast cancers. I rang him and I was like no matter what happens, please can you see mum? We got her in to see Mr Dsouza and I'm an actress, I know what people are feeling. I pick up on people. I watch. We were taught at the drama school and no matter how brilliant Mr Dsouza is, I read it straight away.

They said, "Okay, we're going to do all the tests now." Everything happened then really really quick. And you knew, it was the speed of it, everyone was like something's happening and lo and behold mum had a stage four breast cancer and they got her into the hospital very very quickly. She had the full mastectomy, all the lymph nodes removed. At that point, while she was in the hospital, we got quite angry as a family because it was like... I know it's lovely and people are being really kind but the counsellors were coming in and doing again this tilted head thing which still drives me crackers today, don't tilt your head at me. It's a really patronising thing.

They go giving more pamphlets and pamphlets and and we were like it's okay but thank you, we'll deal with this as if they were basically saying, will you please go and get your mum's casket sorted? It's as if they were literally wearing a t-shirt saying go and order a casket now. Mum felt that at the time and all her time throughout hospital, she had a picture of me and our Liam, next to her bed.

She just said, "No matter what happens, I'm fighting and I won't stop fighting for you two because you are all I need in life." My dad's strength at that point was really really really brilliant, really brilliant. To see how she fought and how she always would say, "There are so many other people who are worse off than me" and she took the mickey because she did have large breasts, she was like, "Look at me, I'm wonky donkey" because she had one big breast and one of them, she didn't want a reconstruction. Whether or not that was a psychological thing thinking, I won't be around and she's like, "I've done my bit with your dad. Your dad's happy."

That was what we always did. We always laughed and we always made jokes. The hardest thing, Clover, was mum losing her hair. She didn't care about losing her breast, she couldn't bear it. My mum went grey very very young. We used to call her salt and pepper when my Nana died, my mum's mum, and it her trademark, it was her. Her brilliant white hair from being so so young. It was dreadful. To see her try the wigs on and to try and again take the comedy side, was hard.

Clover: Yes. I completely hear that. My sister had breast cancer and she had beautiful... You got me going as well.

Lisa: You're painting a picture. You know the moments.

Clover: Yes, she had beautiful long blonde curly hair and I know for her losing that as well... We're are both crying at the moment and it's very nice to be able to cry in front of you because with some people, you feel as though you can't really manifest this grief and there is a kind of convention, I suppose, of keeping it down as well, isn't there? Which is incredibly difficult.

Lisa: Do you feel as well sometimes like... I don't know how long it's been, forgive me, since your sister passed.

Clover: She died in December 2019 just before the beginning of lockdown basically.

Lisa: Oh, horrendous. Do you sometimes feel... I get this a lot where it's like, am I supposed to be over it now? Are people looking at me like I'm a fool? I'm sat here crying with you now, Clover, and I'm like, will Clover think that I'm foolish that I'm still in so much pain? It was 2000 when the dates and stuff, and you look back and you go, oh, it's going to come to the end of July and am I supposed to be feeling better now? That feeling where I said before about how mum never judged people, I feel like I'm being judged because of grief.

I've done so much to personally tackle it and get through it myself and also, of course, help my family, but fundamentally, it doesn't go away. You learn to live with it and people say every day is different and everybody is different. It's like cancer. Cancer is different to every single human being, so is grief. How you're going to feel, how I'm going to feel, how my auntie's going to feel, we're all different, and that's why today this is so important because it's okay to feel how you're feeling.

Clover: Absolutely. No, I think that that's a really important message to get across and to allow people to feel like this and express what the pain is like. Also to remember the person and talk about the person. I think that's really important.

Will you tell me a little bit about your mum's last few hours because I've heard that she actually had a very beautiful final time with you as a family. I love your descriptions of the fact... I think this is so important in life... that you have to be able to laugh about everything, don't you? Even saying this makes me want to cry, but that the need whilst you are in the most extraordinary pain and grief and anger, but you can still have a laugh and that's a very important human reaction. Will you tell me a little bit about her last hours?

Lisa: Yes. The last three days we got what was called a night nanny, amazing. The night nanny was brought in for me and my dad and my brother to eradicate fear, it's a wonderful idea. I would advise anyone to do it when you're told it could be any hour now. We had the night nanny in and she was fantastic and she gives you space and mum's like, she was just so tired, and all she was having was on a tiny little cube sponge, we were to give neat orange just to dampen down her lips. Any minutes, hours she was lucid for, we wanted that time and we were there in the house the whole time. Dad and Liam would go back to my dad's house and then they'd come back and I was always there. I didn't sleep at all. I was just watching her like a newborn baby.

The morning she died. The night nanny said, "It's going to be today". They know, don't they? They know, and there was a lot of morphine involved as there always is at the end. She had the morphine that morning. We come from a very, very devout Catholic family. I'm a bit lapsed now, but my mum's side, very much so. We called the priest and, of course, one thing you're taught and, my mum, from being a little girl, I was taught in a convent the respect you have for the priests and the nuns, but we had fun. We had a laugh.

Auntie Joyce was sat at the head of the bed with mum and everyone was around my auntie, who's now since passed away. My uncle, three of my dearest friends who were like her children, my brother, and my dad. We're all around the bed. Father Paul is there and giving mum last rites. Obviously, I won't swear, I'll say exactly what she said. She looks up at the priest and she says, "What the 'f' are you doing here?!"

[laughter]

I tell you, Clover, we have dined out on that story so much, so much because you don't swear to a priest. That's mum. That laughter and all of us. Then she looked around and she said, "I feel like I'm in an episode of the Sopranos".

[laughter]

And I love that. I remember I was in the back bedroom. I could hear it, after the priest had gone and everyone was downstairs, we used this line, because it's the truth, in the eulogy. I heard her say to Auntie Joyce, she said, "Joyce, darling, I love you. You've been my world, my rock, forever." She said, "Can you please knock some trees down?" Joyce said, "Why?" She said, "For the amount of paper that Lisa's going to need to write my eulogy."

[laughter and crying]

And I think, amazing. That's her. Absolutely amazing. That was very early on. She passed at 7:29pm that night. It was so peaceful. She was in my arms, dad was on the chair, Liam stood at the base of the bed. [crying] We made her so comfy and she knew. About two hours before she died, she said, "The love that I've been blessed with in this family, there are no bounds, but please don't fight." She knew because that's what happens because you can't make it better. [crying]

Clover: Thank you so much for sharing that with me.

Lisa: It's important.

Clover: She just sounds so... I love the fact that she was making so many jokes. It's brilliant. I can feel the love, I can really feel it. I think it's really useful for people listening to this podcast to know about how grief manifested itself for you over the next few months and who was around to support you and how were you best supported?

Lisa: Absolutely. I've talked about this, Clover, openly. As I said before, grief is so individual. I've got my dear friend, Lizzie, who lost her father and her brother very very close together and we spoke about this at length because we're in our little club, we're in our grief club and you will get this. Only when someone has died who you love more than words can say, understands that pain and the anguish and how you feel. My advice to everyone listening to this is find your own club, find people who do understand. There will be and there'll be so many people that want to be able to listen to go and say to you, I feel the same. It's ok to feel like that and have that bubbling anger.

Same with my brother. Like why am I the one that cries openly? Is it because I'm a girly girl? He deals with things differently than me. He didn't love mum any less at all but it's how we are all dealing with it. With my dad, that sheer denial. I often used to look at him and I used to go, "She's not coming back". To see my dad's pain, when I kept saying, "Dad, she's not coming back." He knew because he knew that he could never be to me what mum was. I love my dad so much but it was always me and my mum against the world and everyone that knows us. They say it now. It's like I lost my left arm. I did. I lost my left arm.

Clover: As a family, do you feel as though you supported each other because grief can also do difficult and terrible things to families, can't it? Do you feel as though you were able to be together and give each other the space or the comfort that you needed?

Lisa: Absolutely. That's where Strictly was our family. It was our family grief pot, this big pot that we were in together because they would come down every Saturday from Manchester, they would get the train together and Natalie, my sister-in-law, they'd come to the audience, everyone made a fuss of them and obviously, my dancing was growing and they were loving it and they were very involved.

Obviously, Jakey, my eldest nephew had been born in the September before. Liam had Jakey and a child, a baby can be such a great distraction, and Jakey was at that time. I think Liam completely threw his love into his newborn boy and we both have that feeling with Jakey that he was alive when his Nana was around.

Clover: Yes, that's important, isn't it?

Lisa: We were solid. We were just unbelievably solid. The best moment we always talk about was never thinking for one minute within Strictly that I would get to Wembley. In

our year, we didn't we have Blackpool, we had Wembley in my year. The producers knew at that point I was really struggling. Robin must have spoke to them and said, I don't know, she's in a mess. There's only so much you can cover me in sequins and do my hair and not hide the pain that I was feeling.

I never wanted the press to know that mum had just died because mum wouldn't have wanted anyone voting for us knowing that she'd just passed. We were told that I was going to open Wembley and to this day, I will never ever be able to thank one of the producers more. She organised that dad and Liam and Natalie, my sister-in-law, were on the front row of Wembley. Me and Robin are going to open Wembley like all those years she took me to drama school and to say that and Kim left a seat empty so mum was there and that night was magical because I just said, "Mum, watch, I'm going to open Wembley for you." And I did.

I can say that I'm not blowing smoke up my own bottom here but I rocked Wembley, I did. Bruce Forsyth, God rest his soul, he couldn't speak. The reaction of the crowd and if anyone saw it now, the actual clip, Bruce can't actually get his words out. Everyone knew that night was dedicated to Cath. It was Cath's night and she was on my shoulders. The family unit, that brought us so solid together, it was unbelievable. Fantastic moment.

Clover: Beautiful.

Lisa: I've said before about my brother. I did struggle initially with the fact that he didn't show emotion that I was. Maybe I was judging myself going, "Why can't I stop crying? What is wrong with me?" Annoying myself. I would take that frustration and inner niggling out on him numerous times. There was this one time when I was at home, I'd gone back home and we were in the supermarket and moving the trolley getting all the stuff and we had one of those moments.

It was like, we're both thinking the same thing. We're looking and we're choosing and there was the lemon curd on the shelf in the supermarket. We both look because mum loved lemon curd so much. You know those tears like now, when you cry and they're just dropping, you're not actually sobbing, they're just falling because that's just raw pain?

Clover: Yes.

Lisa: I turned to Liam really frustrated. I was like, "Why aren't you feeling this? Why aren't you feeling like I'm feeling?" Anyway, that happened in the supermarket and we went home. Few months later, my sister-in-law, Nat, when Liam took the children out, she said to me, she said, "Can I ask you personal question Lis?" I was like, "Please, anything you want." She's like, "You know that day you stayed over and you and Liam went to supermarket?" I was like, "Yes." She's like, "Did you two have a massive argument, a huge

barney?" I was like, "No, no, why?" She said, "Oh, it was just because Liam wept the whole night and went to sleep on the couch."

That was his way. From that moment on, Clover, I have completely owned it and understand that Liam's way is internal. He knows that as his big sis, I'm here for him 24/7, but his way is that.

Clover: I think that's really interesting. Do you think that what we can take from that is that you have to make allowances for anybody's behavior or any behavior, I suppose? However, somebody might be holding in, somebody might be weeping, somebody might need to be really angry, but the way to help somebody in grief is to, I suppose, be present to them, but not judge in any way whatsoever.

Lisa: You've hit the nail. You've said everything there. That's exactly what you have to do. You have to let them be how they're being. If they do snap at you or they bite, they don't mean it. They don't. It's just so natural. There's only so many times, however you might go to a bookstore and buy every book on grief and you might find six pages that relate to you, 166 pages won't relate to you in that book as well. Just know, those six pages are you and that's allowed.

Just hope and pray that your family, your peripheral family and certainly your friendship group will know that there's no angst, nothing. Not at all. It's just you have to go, "I will phone you. If I need you, I will phone you." Please don't tilt your head at me and please don't go, are you okay? Are you okay? Are you okay?

Clover: Yes, "How are you?" [laughs]

Lisa: Yes. Asking, "Are you okay? Are you coping?" What? It's like January 10th, mum's birthday, Mother's Day. Yes, they're painful, don't get me wrong, but there's some days which are even more painful because I think we probably have this internal mechanism that I go, "Oh, it's January 10th. It's January 10th. Mum's birthday is coming up." I think about my dad. I think about how dad's going to feel, how's Liam going to feel.

My brother is incredible the way he brings his children up that we talk about Nana Riley all the time. She lives in the moon. The children, every birthday of theirs, we always let the balloons off and they're going to Nana Riley. I love that. I'm so grateful that Liam lets that happen.

Clover: Yes. It would be lovely to talk a bit about how your mum is present to you now and to your family and to the children, and how you mark anniversaries and how you get through anniversaries because they're all so very painful, aren't they?

Lisa: They are. They are. Mother's Day, I zone into my sister-in-law, Natalie, for being the best mum to my nephews and niece. Unfortunately, my biological clock didn't let me be a mother. Also, I said many years ago, I don't know if I could have ever coped having a child, knowing I wouldn't want my child to go through the pain that I go through, and that's always been in my little, I call it my hamster cog in my head that goes around, because I wouldn't want to do that to my worst enemy. I really wouldn't.

Together, Christmas, and please, please forgive me if this makes me sound a bit bah humbug. It's a day. I sometimes really want to work at Christmas to make it go away. Me and Al, my fiancé, for the past three years, we've gone away for Christmas. We're just us together and he knows if I have a little blip and I have a bit of a wobble that he is absolutely incredible of knowing that I don't need smothering. He'll say to me, "Why don't you go and ring your dad or go and FaceTime your dad and make sure your dad's okay as well." My dad's so lucky because he's hugely involved with Liam and the children.

That's his safe haven, and because as always, I do, I throw myself into my work, but then again, I am very lucky because I can use my pain within my work. I've been shooting Paul's death, my partner in the show, and I remember Ruth, one of our sound operators and lovely Simon, one of our cameramen, they were like, "How do you cry?" Because some actors use tear sticks. I've never used a tear stick in my life, and if you do, that's fine. I was like, "I've got a really special angel who always wants me to do well." She was there when I started acting at nine years old and here I am approaching 45 in July. She's still with me, Clover. I do it, and I prove myself.

The best WhatsApps I get is with *Three Girls*, when we got the BAFTA, and I did this for my mum, but every WhatsApp said, your mum would be so proud of you. Your mum would be... Every single, nothing about the awards. Nothing, and *Three Girls*, was a groundbreaking drama, but nothing more, it was the reams of messages of, "Your mum would be so proud."

Clover: Yes, do you feel that part of your grief and understanding your grief is also about understanding her ongoing presence in your life? I suppose... Do you feel that you are taking her forward with you?

Lisa: I made that promise that her legacy would live on through me, and we had a saying, me and mum said this literally till a few days before she passed away, "Live your life so the priest doesn't have to lie at your funeral." That is the gospel mantra that we live by. I have an inscription in my kitchen. It's on the wall in my kitchen and that's who we are, and that's what I do, and I have to do it for her because I feel her presence. I do feel her. I feel like, and yellow, everyone knows yellow is so my mum. Everything yellow, it's like they say, look for signs. Whenever it's yellow, it's my mum.

Everyone laughs at me, she's in every room in the house apart from the toilets, my three bathrooms, she's not in there, but in every room, there's pictures of her, and they will never, ever go.

Clover: It sounds like you've got incredible support in your family and in your work as well. That's a really wonderful thing. When you are having a bad day or a bad moment, what other things do the people who are close to you, around you, what do they do to help you with your grief?

Lisa: They were very aware. They read me, and they call it BB, it's bravado button. I do press the bravado button sometimes. I don't know if you're the same. We would go out all my girls together, who knew her, who grew up with her from being... We're still the bestest of friends now, we're all 45, we were all at school together, and we'll sit and we'll talk about her and remember stories that sometimes I'd forgotten something like, "Oh my god, do you remember she did that? Do you remember she did that?"

There was one the other day we were laughing when she fell off a stool and we shouldn't be laughing, but it was hilarious. The wedding we were going to, she literally looked like she'd been battered by Tyson because her glasses, and she had this big black eye, but we were just laughing because we want to relive those moments.

My dad's really, really brilliant in that sense, and we celebrated his birthday and we'd made this diabetic cheesecake for him, and he was just like, "Oh, you're just like your mother, you just like your mother." That is the best gift. It doesn't cost anything, it's free, and he said, "You're just like your mother" because I want to be. I don't want to live it through, and I want dad to feel comfy, the same with my brother and my sister-in-law and the kids. I want her laughter to ring through the house. We made that promise to her.

Clover: I suppose, as time passes, that ability to really celebrate and really, really remember, I suppose even when you're having really acute pain, as you said, you get together with your girlfriends and you really, really remember her, whether it's her falling, the barstool, I think that does get easier with time, doesn't it? Because I found, and still find, immediately after my sister died, I sometimes just couldn't think about her, I couldn't look at photographs of her because it was too painful but as the time and it is obviously... We've both cried in this podcast but as time moves forward, the ability to feel the joy of the person, actually in your life, actually manifesting itself in your life, gets stronger, I think.

Lisa: Yes, which is why sometimes always let your nearest and dearest know. Like I said before about the anger thing, let them know that it's okay to write a letter to you or write an email where they're not expecting your response. Just go, oh, "do you remember

when Cath did this? Do you know what Cath meant to me? Have I ever told you what Cath did this time? Do you remember when Cath"... Just put it down in an email and send it, never ever wanting a reply. Just know that the person on the other side, ie me or you, is reading that and you are giving them such joy possibly through tears, you know, but let them know that you're there when needed. I love that. That's what we always say to my friends and they know that now. I've learned obviously when friends of mine have lost people because I'm going to stand back now and I'm going to do it the way I like. That might not be right for them but that's the way I know.

Clover: I think that bit of advice you've just given of "put down any memories" because I lost my mum a long time ago as well and people who knew her when she was a young woman, I love hearing just these little things. It could just be a few lines. I think that's a wonderful piece of advice.

Let's just finish up with... For somebody going through what you've been through, what I've been through, so many of us, which we all will go through as well, what is the most useful piece of advice that you could say to somebody who's supporting a close friend or family member who's lost someone that they really, really love? What is a piece of advice of something that they could say or something that they could do that would be helpful?

Lisa: First of all, never be scared to let the other person know that you're there for them but it's how you approach it. My advice would be, go to the shop and buy them a notebook and a pen, write your name at the top and give that and just leave it and say, "Write down in there everything that you want to when you're ready, and hopefully, there'll be a time in the future where we can come together and read together those moments."

That's being a true, true friend. It's this word and I never use this word, you probably know this - understanding - because there isn't a way. Know that this word, you can't use it, there's not a way of understanding because it doesn't exist. It doesn't exist where grief exists. Find your own feeling towards the other person and know that it's okay and don't suffocate, that's my biggest advice.

Please don't suffocate the person. They know you're there, they know you're at the end of a phone, they know they can walk to your property and say, "Can we go and grab a cup of tea together?" They know that but let them come for a cup of tea, don't go to them. From the time of the loved one dying to the day of the funeral... My biggest advice is there's a reason the funeral companies are so incredible and so solid and so kind, is because that's what they do every day and that's why they do, with the love in their heart for the families. Just know that the family have to deal with it together. Please don't try

and throw yourself in that bowl because your worth and your love is so much more needed afterwards. I swear by that.

Clover: This is a long process, isn't it? People sometimes want to help in the beginning but weeks, months, years later, that's when the support is needed.

Lisa: Absolutely.

Clover: It's beautiful seeing you so open with your emotions. I think it's really, really helpful to people. Thank you so much, Lisa. It's been such a privilege talking to you today. I'm so grateful for you.

Lisa: I've only met you on here but I will say what my mum would say and I can feel it just through speaking to you, you are one of life's luxuries. That's what mum would have said so I'm thanking you. That's a mum sentence, that's a Cath sentence. You are.

Clover: Oh, so beautiful.

Lisa: Thank you, I mean it.

Clover: My thanks to Lisa Riley for her time and her incredible honesty. Grief is different for everybody. There is no one-size-fits-all approach, but you don't need a degree in counselling 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 about how to help grieving friends and relatives, go to sue Ryder.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.