

The little things that HELPED US THROUGH

Continuing our look at the very complex subject of grief, we share three women's stories that explain the different ways they found to help them cope

'I have learned that beauty is healing'

The loss of her son, Saagar, left DR SANGEETA MAHAJAN, 56, an anaesthetist from London, feeling devastated, until a childhood fascination became a path to peace.



In the autumn of 2014, my friend Pinky invited me to an exhibition of Ikebana, the art of Japanese flower arranging. It reminded me of a book my mother had and how, as

a child, I'd never tired of turning its pages, admiring the exotic creations. At the exhibition, a serene, elegant beauty met my eyes. It made me feel peaceful and deeply connected with nature. I wanted to sign up for lessons but my darling son, Saagar, had been diagnosed with a serious illness, bipolar disorder, a few weeks before, so I decided to put it off until he got better.

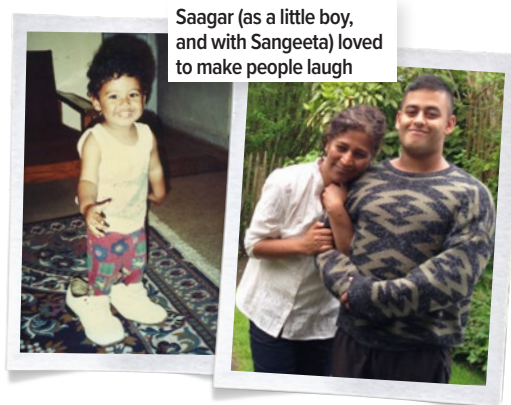
But, six weeks later, I returned from work to find a piece of paper

on the third step of my staircase. It read: *Sorry, I can't take this any more.* It was Saagar's handwriting but I didn't know where he was or how to find him. Then two kind policemen came to the door and told me the devastating news of his death. I had no idea how to deal with anything like this. My world blackened. I was exiled to an unsurvivable reality. It was filled with the absence of my Saagar – who loved making everyone

laugh, spending time with his friends, playing the drums and fast bowling. Saagar moved with me from India to the UK in 1999 for my work as a trainee anaesthetist, his dad and sister following soon after. While Saagar's sister returned to India to study, Saagar attended Dulwich College in London. His love of languages led him to take French and Arabic at Durham University but at the end of his second year, during the summer holidays, I'd noticed his atypical sleeping and eating habits. His confidence seemed to have soared. It was a confusing time – was this youthful enthusiasm, Saagar

'I've found a way to keep him alive in my heart'

changing as a person or something else? Soon it became clear he needed medical attention, which he received. Unfortunately, it failed to keep him alive. His sudden and traumatic death brought my life to a complete halt. I returned to India and, for months, I simply sat. It was like watching a film about somebody else's life. When I finally returned to the UK, I started the Ikebana lessons. It's like meditating with nature. Wood symbolises mountains and grasses and



Saagar (as a little boy, and with Sangeeta) loved to make people laugh

flowers suggest water, creating a natural landscape in a single vase and welcoming the outdoors into your home. It was a much-needed break from the cacophony in my mind. I began to look forward to the lessons and reconnected with the quiet place in my heart that was open to receiving beauty and joy. I joined Pinky's circle of skilled flower-arrangers and realised Ikebana's simple healing power. I'll miss my son as long as I live, but I have found a way to keep him alive in my heart as beauty and kindness.

• Sangeeta offers online peer support for bereaved parents at core-community.com. She is one of 13 contributors to a new book *When Words Are Not Enough: Creative Responses To Grief* (Quickthorn Books) by Jane Harris and Jimmy Edmonds, founders of The Good Grief Project. Visit thegoodgriefproject.co.uk



Ikebana's serene beauty is calming



Amanda hopes to get her pilot's licence soon



The couple shared a sense of adventure

'I took to the skies in his memory'

AMANDA RUTHERFORD, 50, who works for a homeless charity and lives in Dalkeith, Midlothian, found an inspiring way to channel her grief.

Up in the clouds, I can forget the pain and loneliness. My wonderful husband, Davie, was my sounding board, travel buddy and best friend – and he died aged 59 of pancreatic cancer.

We'd met at work at a homeless charity. He was easygoing, with a brilliant sense of humour. We loved travelling and I always joked that I'd learn to fly a plane and, one day, on a flight he'd hear me say: 'This is

your captain speaking.' We had so many plans for our future, so many places we wanted to see, and it was all taken away.

My grief was a complex, shifting range of emotions. I'd find myself counting the days and weeks since I'd last seen Davie. He died in January 2022 on a Saturday at 3pm, and every Saturday at the same time I'd go and sit by his grave. I felt I couldn't leave, which I knew wasn't healthy. I needed to channel my grief into

something positive – but what? Then, a few months later, I was going through some paperwork and I found a voucher for a flying lesson. It had been Davie's last gift to me and I'd forgotten about it in the heartbreak over his death. In that moment, I'd found my answer. I booked a lesson on what would have been Davie's birthday in July. In the morning, I took flowers to his grave, and that afternoon I nervously climbed into the tiny two-seater plane with my instructor, George.

Instead of crying in a cemetery at 3pm, I was up in the clouds for an hour, feeling liberated. As soon as we landed, I wanted to get back up there and I soon signed up for more lessons. I now spend nearly every weekend flying and I'm working towards getting my pilot's licence.

I miss Davie every moment of every day. Flying doesn't ease the pain, but it's an outlet, which is so important for anyone navigating grief. And I'll carry Davie in my heart on every adventure.

• Visit widowedandyoung.org.uk

'I stitched myself back together'

Margie Orford, 58, from London, found using her hands healed her.

My little sister, Penelope Jane – who I called Melle – and I loved to draw together. Growing up in Namibia, our mother made mosaics and had an ottoman full of pens, papers and paints – a treasure trove of creativity. Even from a young age, it was a form of self-expression.

Though I moved around a lot and lived in many different countries, Melle and I stayed close. I married, and by the time I'd had all three of my children, I was living in Namibia again. Melle was like a second mother to them. She had this wild streak that they loved and she would often take them on adventures.

After my divorce, I moved back to London, and in November 2021, my

mother rang me and told me that Melle had suffered a bleed on the brain. Frantic to be by her side, I boarded the next flight.

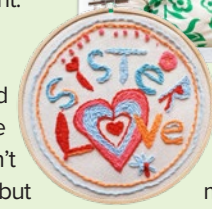
When I finally got to the hospital, Melle was slipping into a coma. I sat by her bed and felt so powerless. In the end, I began knitting. I wasn't knitting anything particular, but this thing got longer and longer.

A few days later, the doctors told us that the machines keeping Melle alive had to be switched off. Her husband and I held her hands as she died. She was just 55. It was like I had been ripped apart.

When I returned to London, desperate for a distraction from my grief, I embroidered a tapestry that said 'Sister Love'. It felt like



Margie (left); Melle was like a second mother to her children



I was embroidering around the jagged edges of a hole Melle had left. Slowly, I was stitching myself back together.

I have since made a number of tapestries – the process painful each time and yet also cathartic. The physical nature of making something new is like a shoot of life through the sadness. It's a way of looking outside yourself and finding beauty in the world again.

• *The Eye Of The Beholder* (Canongate Books) by Margie Orford is out now

As told to Ella Dove and Bryony Gooch