

The market for products and services to help deal with bereavement is growing at a surprising rate. Here **Jon Davies** examines how online tributes can help people to cope with a death in the family.

Helping the bereaved

People always need help dealing with the death of a close family member or friend; it is common for them to get through a difficult time such as this by staying close to each other and coping with the death together as a group. Increasingly

though there are products and services coming on to the market to help people deal with death; board games and websites such as MuchLoved.com, which channel the bereaved's grief into a positive creative outlet, are among some of the recent innovations in this area.

The help a tribute website can provide will be very specific and personal to each user, and will depend on a number of factors such as the type of bereavement suffered, the relationship they had with the deceased and their current emotional state and position.

For most bereaved people a memorial website is simply an additional tool that can be used if felt to be of help, and whilst only a small minority currently decides to create one, it has been found that for many of them it becomes a fundamental part of their grief support.

This can be illustrated by some of the testimonials, which are typical of those sent in by users:

“Being able to create Debbie’s tribute has helped far, far more than any other means I have tried since she passed.

“Having somewhere you can drop the pretence and talk about how you really feel is so important, and it helps me immensely. Putting Alex’s memorial together is an ongoing and

much needed therapy for me and my family.”

There are three broad areas in which a memorial website can be seen to be of help to the bereaved.

Early grief

The website can be a place and a way of expressing feelings and of keeping some kind of contact or connection with the deceased as the bereaved respond to the initial shock and pain of loss.

The act of actually creating the website and adding content is in itself something that they can positively do for their loved one and to focus on when things feels futile. Also, it can be a vital place to find helpful grief resource information such as specialist bereavement organisations, plus making contact with others in a similar position to share in mutual support.

Practical help

The website can be used as



a place to display funeral arrangements and then to record details from the funeral, especially for those who could not attend.

It provides an additional way for friends and family to send condolences and messages that can also be put on public display if requested, and of course there are no geographical or time constraints for visiting.

If the next of kin wish to raise In Memoriam donations, the website is also the perfect vehicle for collecting these and for displaying messages of support from donors.

Remembrance and commemorative help

As the cost of hosting a website online is minimal, a memorial website is an ideal way of preserving memories of the deceased over the medium and long term for future generations to visit and read.

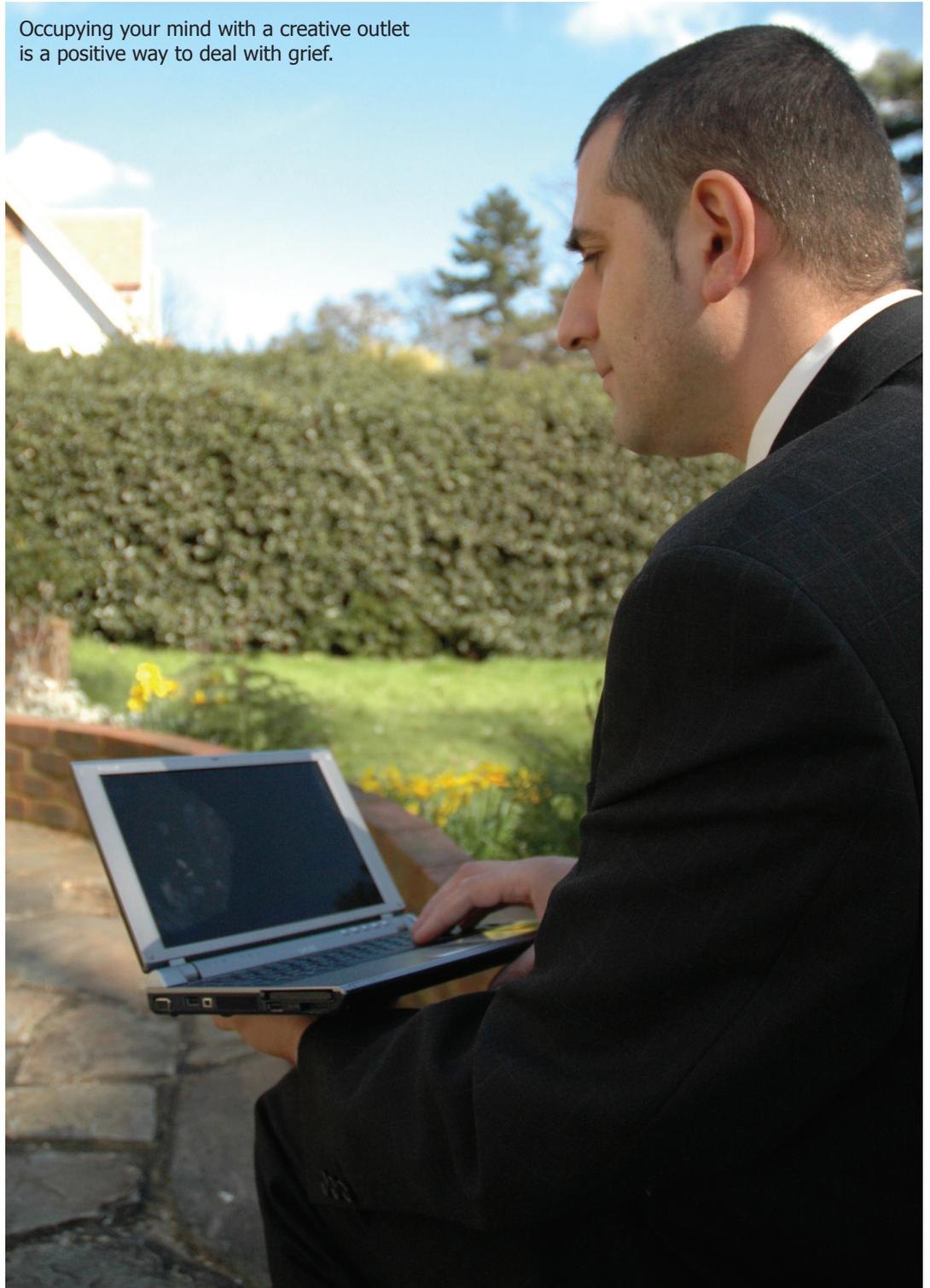
In tandem with this and as the next of kin work through their grief, the website can be developed as a place to actively commemorate the deceased's life, recording it through pictures, stories and even video clips.

The website can therefore remain a special place for people to visit and to remember for years afterwards on anniversaries and other special days.

Growing popularity of memorial websites

People in general are now much more familiar with

Occupying your mind with a creative outlet is a positive way to deal with grief.



the concept of memorial websites. Only a few years ago they might give a blank face when a memorial website was explained to them, and even suggest that it seemed rather morbid. Now almost everyone is not only aware of the idea, but

feels broadly comfortable with it.

The popularity of memorial websites is also growing; in particular on social networking sites where memorial pages are created and shared very easily. There are a number

of commercial memorial sites that have launched in the last 18 months to try to tap into this change, and examples of these include Respectance, Lasting Tribute and Eternal Space, which have all made large investments into this area. →



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➔ At the same time many of the early pioneer sites such as ShareMyMemory and The Last Respect have shut down. These were primarily simpler services, normally started by someone creating their own memorial website and then deciding to open it up to the public to use; these had difficulty competing with the more advanced tribute sites, which offer such aesthetics as virtual Zen gardens and the ability to add pictures and music.

Recent research by MuchLoved shows that the majority of memorial websites are created by women, and nearly half are in honour of children, babies and stillborns. Whilst there is clearly a bias towards creating memorial sites for those whose lives

have been cut short, nearly a quarter of all tributes are to remember people who died over the age of 50; this shows evidence of the growing general appeal of a memorial website service.

Advice

A good site should certainly offer the following features and controls as a minimum

- The ability to easily upload and display text, photos, music and video
- Personalisation and design options and settings
- Controls over access to the site, including an Invitations facility
- Options regarding review and acceptance of contributions made to the site
- The ability to edit all

content at any time

- A long term integrated hosting service

Rather than becoming a new memorial product, a memorial website can and should be a grief support service more akin to counseling, to be provided on a free-to-all-with-need basis. MuchLoved, for instance, is a free service as well as a registered charity.

If clients are considering a commercial site then there are a growing number which display a 'Free Service' headline, but people considering them should look out for the commercial conditions that will have to exist: is it free to initially create, but with a hosting charge or other indirect charges afterwards? Will the client be sent emails trying

to sell related products? Will the email address be sold to other companies, or will the website have adverts added to it?

Apart from these concerns there are a number of more general considerations for selecting a preferred service. Prospective clients should look for clear details about the organisation providing the service; are the service costs explained? Could the website be profiled on the homepage without permission, and are there sufficient privacy settings to control access and posting permissions?

More and more bereaved people are deciding to create an online tribute as part of their grieving process, and so information and advice on the options by Funeral Directors will clearly be helpful as part of their After Care service. **FST**

Jonathon Davies is the creator of MuchLoved, a UK charity set up to help people create beautiful and special memorial websites after the death of his brother Philip at the age of 21.

The charity works with leading bereavement organisations, runs a support community and has founded the Memorial Code to establish best practice. MuchLoved is offering Funeral Directors their own customised version of the memorial website service to offer to their clients; this partnership is completely free and gives the opportunity of offering clients a helpful service that will assist many of them in their bereavement process.

For more details please contact thematsupport@muchloved.com or visit their partnership website at www.muchlovedpartners.com